Computer active
ISSUE 714 | 16 – 29 JULY 2025
Learn something new in every issue

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- ✚ Switch now – it's EASY!

PLUS

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We've switched to this new Roku

FIND YOUR HOME'S BEST SPOT FOR PHONE SIGNALS
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WELCOME

From the Editor

You know a company is serious about privacy when it stores your data in a decommissioned military bunker under a Swiss mountain. Proton did precisely that when it launched, before moving its servers to equally secure locations in Zurich.

When it released its first tool (Proton Mail) in 2015 I thought its focus on security was overkill. But not now. As tech giants (especially Google) become more reliant on advertising, it's clear we need alternatives that won't sell your details to the highest bidder.

Impregnable security would be pointless if the tools were hard to use, but Proton makes them wonderfully simple – and it's easy to switch from Gmail and Google Drive. I've done both this year, having already moved to its password manager in 2024. Next, I'll try its VPN when I go on holiday this August.

Robert Irvine is also a fan, as you'll see by his enthusiasm in our Cover Feature. Add Proton to Brave (for browsing) and DuckDuckGo (for search) and you'll become even less dependent on Google.

Daniel Booth
editor@computeractive.co.uk

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60 days
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HOW TO USE SNIPCA URLs

We use snipcas to turn long URLs that are hard to type into ones that are short and simple. They aren't websites themselves, which means they won't be recognised if you type them into Google. Instead, you need to type them into your browser address bar, then press Enter. Doing this will take you to the correct website.

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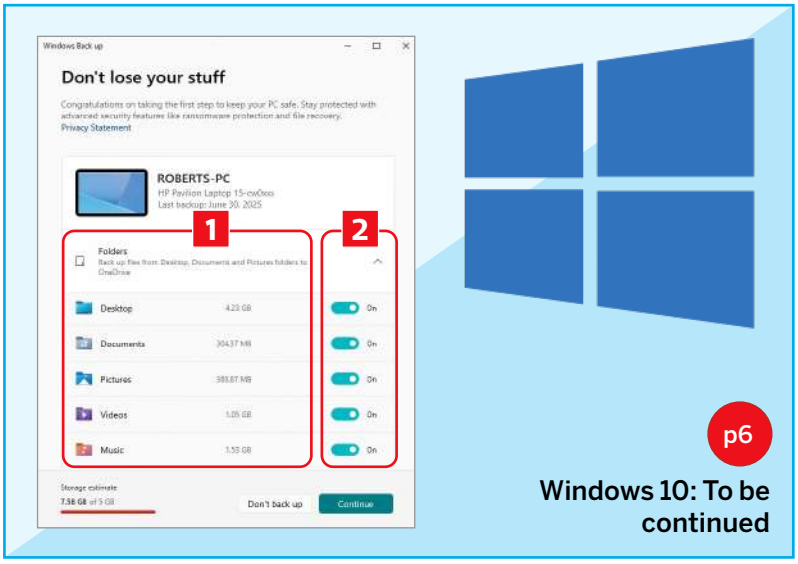

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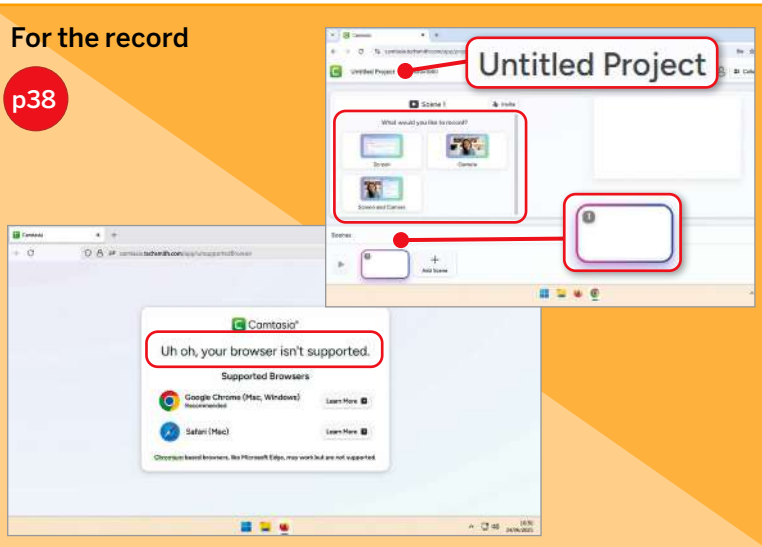

Ditch Google for Proton

COVER FEATURE P50

Why it's BETTER & SAFER for email, VPN, passwords and storage

Hack your car's USB port

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Extend Windows 10's life by turning on Windows Backup

Microsoft has made the surprise decision to extend Windows 10 support for free for 12 months, but only if you turn on and use Windows Backup.

It's a major U-turn by the company, which has been urging users to upgrade to Windows 11 before it ends support for Windows 10 on 14 October.

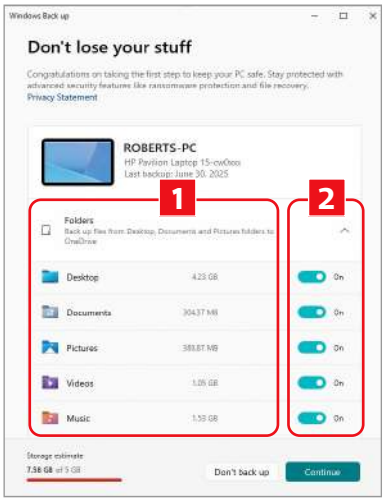
The company is already offering paid-for support for a further 12 months with its Extended Security Updates (ESU) scheme (www.snipca.com/55368). This involves a one-off purchase of $30 or a "local currency equivalent plus applicable tax", meaning it's likely to cost around £22 to £27 in the UK.

But the new offer doesn't cost anything – you just need to turn on Windows Backup, which syncs key folders like Desktop, Documents and Pictures to your OneDrive account, automatically uploading any new or changed files.

However, OneDrive gives you only 5GB of free storage. You can get 100GB by paying £1.99 a month or £19.99 a year for Microsoft 365 Basic. If you hit this limit, Windows Backup will stop syncing and you'll stop receiving security updates.

You can increase this to 1TB if you pay £8.49 a month or £84.99 a year for Microsoft 365 Personal. Pay £10.49 a month or £104.99 a year for Microsoft 365 Family and you'll get 6TB, though it's limited to 1TB per person – for full details see www.snipca.com/55369.

Microsoft's decision means that if you're already paying for Microsoft 365 and you're using Windows Backup, you'll automatically continue to receive support for Windows 10 until October 2026 without paying anything extra.



Turn on Windows Backup

To turn on Windows Backup, press Windows key+I to open Settings, then click Accounts followed by 'Your info' to sign into your Microsoft account if you haven't already.

Next, type backup in Windows Search and open the tool. Now expand the Folders section (1 in our screenshot above) then back up your Desktop, Documents, Pictures, Videos and Music folders by turning on the sliders 2.

You can also back up apps, settings and credentials (logins and passwords) by opening those sections and turning on the sliders. Microsoft explains these steps at www.snipca.com/55375 – make sure you click the Windows 10 tab at the top.

Microsoft also announced you can get 12 months' support by spending 1,000 Microsoft Rewards points. You earn these by using Microsoft services such as searching on Bing, browsing in Edge and buying apps in the Microsoft Store – read Microsoft's blog for details www.snipca.com/55371.

WHAT WE THINK

So, Microsoft has blinked first in its standoff with 400 million Windows 10 users. But this is no free lunch. Many users will easily hit that 5GB OneDrive limit, forcing them to pay for more storage if they want to keep receiving updates until October 2026. This is part of Microsoft's long-term strategy to make you dependent on its online services (also see page 10). It's cynical and clever, but you can get around it by keeping your backups under 5GB. We'll explain how soon.

NO WINDOWS 12 THIS YEAR AS 25H2 IS CONFIRMED

Microsoft has confirmed that Windows 11 25H2 will be released later this year, ending speculation that it was planning to launch Windows 12 instead.

It made early versions of 25H2 available to Windows Insiders at the end of June.

Updating from 24H2 to 25H2 will be "as easy as a quick restart," wrote principal program manager Jason Leznek on Microsoft's blog (www.snipca.com/55378).

He said it will be installed using an enablement package, which turns on features that have already been added to the operating system in recent updates to Windows 11 24H2. Microsoft has been using this method since 2019.

However, the company will hope for a smoother upgrade than the release of 24H2 last autumn, which contained numerous bugs.

Microsoft hasn't announced any new features in 25H2 yet, suggesting it will be a small update and so potentially less prone to problems.

You'll like this...
Man uses Google Earth to win planning bid against council (www.snipca.com/55376)

but not this...
Victims lost £3.5m in 2024 to QR code scams (www.snipca.com/55377)

Patient dies after Russian attack on NHS blood supplies

One patient died as a result of a 2024 cyber-attack by a Russian gang on hospital blood services, the King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust has confirmed.

The crime syndicate Qilin claimed responsibility for the attack on 3 June 2024, which infected computers run by Synnovis – which runs blood tests for the NHS – with ransomware.

It meant the company was unable to match donor blood to patients safely, forcing hospitals to cancel procedures, delay treatments and rely on emergency supplies.

A spokesperson for the trust said a "long wait for a blood test result" was one of several factors contributing to the patient's death.

More than 10,000 appointments were cancelled at both King's College Trust and Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust, while many GP practices in London were unable to order blood tests.

A spokesperson for King's College Trust said a comprehensive review had been taken of the patient's care, and it has been shared with the patient's family.

The spokesperson couldn't confirm the date of death or the person's age, citing patient confidentiality.

Mark Dollar, chief executive of Synnovis, said he was "deeply saddened" by the patient's death.

A report in the *Health Service Journal* claims there were nearly 600 "incidents" linked to the attack, with patients suffering harm in 170 of them.

Soon after the attack Qilin said it was "sorry" for the harm caused, but claimed it wasn't to blame.

Talking to the BBC through an encrypted chat service, it said the attack was a form of political protest against the UK's actions in an unspecified war.

Anker recalls power banks over fire risk

Anker has recalled five power banks sold in the UK because of the risk they could catch fire.

The Chinese firm said anyone who owns an affected model should stop using it immediately "due to the risk of overheating, melting, smoke or fire". It said the problem comes from faulty lithium-ion battery cells.

"While the likelihood of malfunction is considered minimal, out of an abundance of caution, we have decided to initiate a voluntary global recall of several Anker power bank models," it added.

To check whether you own one of the five power banks (see box left) look at the bottom or on one side for a model and serial number. Anker also lists the affected models at www.snipca.com/55443, and provides instructions on how to dispose of the faulty models.

The website also explains how to claim a replacement power bank.

For further assistance, phone Anker's UK support at 01604 936 200 or email the company at **uk.support@anker.com**.

POWER BANK MODELS RECALLED

- Anker Power Bank (10K, 22.5W), model A1257 (pictured right)
- Anker Power Bank (20,000mAh, 22.5W), model A1647
- Anker MagGo Power Bank (10,000mAh, 7.5W), model A1652
- Anker Zolo Power Bank (20K, 30W), model A1681
- Anker Zolo Power Bank (20K, 30W), model A1689

IN BRIEF

21 NEW AREAS GET FIBRE BROADBAND

Openreach has named the next 21 areas to receive full-fibre broadband, including parts of Basildon, Coventry, Didcot and Worcester. It covers 80,000 premises and is the first update since December. Work is scheduled to be completed by March 2026. See the full list at www.snipca.com/55441.

AMAZON CLOSES FREEVEE TV SERVICE

Amazon will close Freevee in August. Opening the app for the free TV service now shows a message saying you can continue to watch Freevee shows on Prime Video instead (see www.snipca.com/55442). These are marked as 'Watch for Free' and don't require a Prime subscription.

Prime Video is the new exclusive home for Freevee
freevee
Prime Video is the new exclusive home for Freevee TV shows, movies and Live TV

TOMORROW'S WORLD

This laptop has E Ink's new touchpad, which doubles as a screen showing summaries, reminders, weather updates and more. That sounds like it would devour a laptop's battery, but E Ink says the screen is made from e-paper (like Kindles) and so uses minimal power. We'll put that to the test should it develop beyond a prototype.

IN BRIEF

PLUSNET SCRAPS FREE EMAIL & WEBSPACE

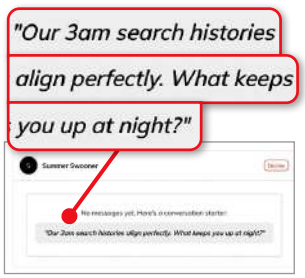
Plusnet is scrapping its free email and webspace, moving users to paid-for services by Hampshire firm Greenby. Broadband customers get two years before having to pay £15 a year, while email-only users must start paying after 30 days or lose access. It's the latest cutback from Plusnet, following the closure of its TV, mobile and landline services. Read more at www.snipca.com/55332.

CLASSIC UK FILMS COME TO VIRGIN

Virgin TV customers can now watch the channel British Screen Classics, containing films such as *The Dam Busters*, *The 39 Steps* and *Kind Hearts and Coronets*. Watch the channel's trailer at www.snipca.com/55335. Also new is the Wedotv channel, showing over 500 modern films. They're available on channels 450 and 451 respectively.

THE WORLD'S GONE MAD!

If you're single and have stopped swiping on Tinder, why not upload your browser history to https://browser.dating? The answer is that it's an insane privacy risk and totally bonkers, but this new site will analyse your online activity to find your perfect match. It even suggests chat-up lines (pictured).



Amazon's Ring cameras show AI text summaries of events

Amazon's Ring cameras and doorbells now offer AI-generated text summaries of recorded events, describing what's happening so you can decide whether to watch the footage.

For example, instead of generic alerts such as 'Person detected' the cameras will show messages like 'Two people are peering into a white car in the driveway' (see screenshot 1), 'A dog is tearing up paper towels on the rug' 2 and 'Man in red hoodie leaves a package on the doorstep'.

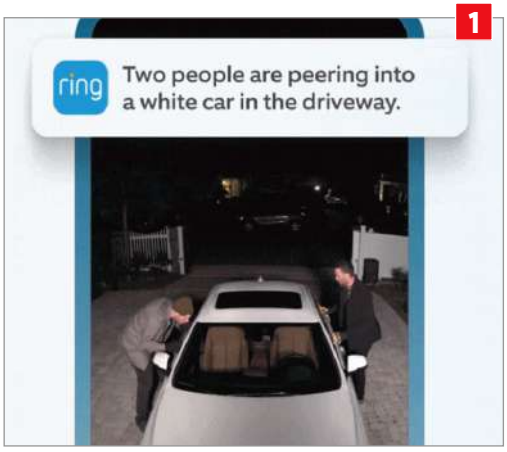
However, it's available only for Ring Home Premium subscribers in the US and Canada. This is the most expensive subscription, priced £15.99 a month, and also includes 24-hour footage saved for 14 days and the ability to search for events, such as 'Pizza delivery' (see www.snipca.com/55334).

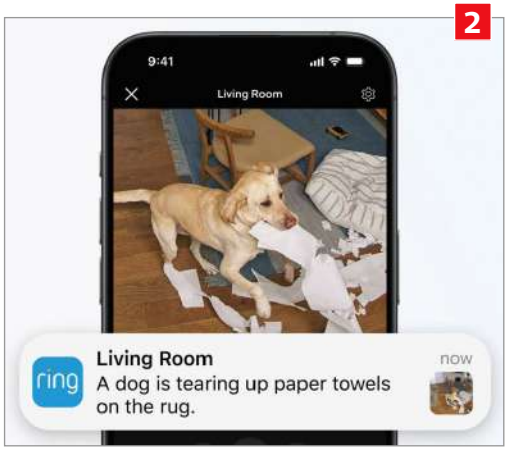
Amazon didn't say whether AI summaries will come to the UK, but most features launched first in the US and Canada tend to arrive here within months.

It added that cameras and doorbells will now also use AI to show "custom anomaly alerts", which appear only when something unusual happens on your property.

Amazon said its AI will "learn the routines of your residence" so it only notifies you "when it is something out of the ordinary".

Visit Amazon's site for more details: www.snipca.com/55333.





Check phone signals in your area on new Ofcom map

Ofcom has launched a new map that lets you check phone-signal strength based on data collected from users rather than speeds claimed by mobile networks.

The regulator said it's "the most comprehensive tool for comparing mobile coverage and performance to be made available in the UK".

To use it, visit www.snipca.com/55336 then type your postcode at the top left.

This will show a colour-coded map on the right (1 in screenshot), indicating 'good' and 'variable' signals both indoors and outdoors – with purple signifying the best service.

You can filter the results by network and by signal quality.

The percentage scores on the left represent the chance of getting a reliable signal for different uses, such as making calls, downloading a web page or streaming video.

For example, in our screenshot EE users report a good signal 87 per cent of the time 2.

The map uses data from over 20 million results provided by users across all networks, and submitted to mobile-analytics firm Opensignal.

This makes the results more accurate and useful than Ofcom's previous map, which was based on computer-based predictions from EE, O2, Three and Vodafone.

• **Find your home's signal 'sweet spot' – page 74**

UK's biggest porn site to introduce age-verification checks

Pornhub, the UK's most popular pornography site, will soon introduce age-verification checks to stop children watching sex.

Aylo, the site's parent company, confirmed it will comply with Ofcom's new rules, which force all adult sites to use "highly effective age checks".

The measures, due to be implemented on 25 July as part of the Online Safety Act, also cover social media, search and gaming services that provide access to sexual content.

Other sites that have said they'll start checking age include LiveHDCams, RedTube, Tube8 and YouPorn.

Pornhub didn't say how it would verify age, but methods used by other sites include photo ID, credit-card checks and using a phone app to estimate age.

In June, Aylo temporarily disabled Pornhub and its other adult sites in France to protest about similar laws, which it deemed too intrusive because they involved Government-issued identity cards.

But it's agreed to Ofcom's rules because it feels there's less risk to users' privacy.

Ofcom will no longer allow sites to use weaker methods, such as users ticking a box to declare they're 18 or older.

"Society has long protected youngsters from products that aren't suitable for them, from alcohol to smoking or gambling. But for too long children have been only a click away from harmful pornography online," said Oliver Griffiths, Ofcom's group director of online safety.

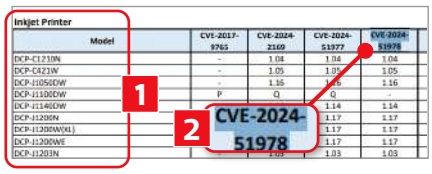
"Now, change is happening.

These age checks will bring pornography into line with how we treat adult services in the real world, without compromising access and privacy for over-18s," he added.

Will the age block be effective? Let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

Use a Brother printer? Change its password now!

Brother has urged customers to change their default passwords on printers after researchers found they were too easy for hackers to guess.



Analysts at US security firm Rapid7 claim they worked out the method Brother used for creating the passwords, which involves the printer's serial number.

Hackers can then exploit one flaw (CVE-2024-51977) to leak the printer's serial number before taking advantage of another (CVE-2024-51978) to generate the password.

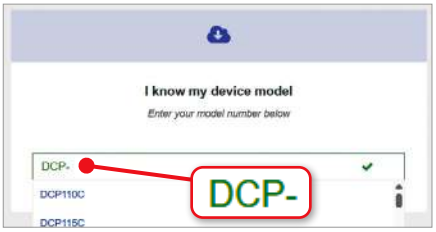
These are the two most serious of eight vulnerabilities found by Rapid7. Brother has released firmware updates for seven of them, including the flaw that leaks serial numbers, but the only way to fix the password flaw is to manually change it.

Researchers say the flaws affect 689 Brother printers, as well as 53 other models from Fujifilm Business, Konica, Ricoh and Toshiba.

To check if your Brother printer is affected, find its serial number then look in the Model column on the left of the company's list at www.snipca.com/55358 (1 in our screenshot below left).

If it's there, check which 'CVE' flaw it's affected by 2, then visit www.snipca.com/55359 and type your serial number in the box (see screenshot below). Now follow Brother's instructions to download the firmware update.

If your printer is affected by CVE-2024-51978 you'll also need to change its default password – follow Brother's steps at www.snipca.com/55360.



IN BRIEF

PHONE BLACKSPOTS ON TRAINS 'FIXED BY 2028'

Network Rail has pledged to eliminate phone blackspots on major rail lines by 2028. It's working with telecoms firms Freshwave and Neos to provide 4G and 5G on East Coast, West Coast and Great Western routes, as well as in 57 tunnels covering almost 50 kilometres. Read more at Gov.UK: www.snipca.com/55345.

UPDATE WINRAR TO FIX SECURITY FLAW

WinRAR users should update the software to version 7.12 to fix a flaw that allows hackers to infect your PC with malware. It doesn't update automatically, so you'll need to download the new version. Visit www.snipca.com/55351 then scroll down and click the blue link under the 'Availability' heading.

GET MORE DATA WITH VODAFONE BASICS

Vodafone has increased how much 4G data you get in its SIM Only Basics deals. The cheapest package (£7 a month) now offers 21GB, up from 6GB, while £8 a month gets 80GB, up from 50GB. They all have unlimited UK call minutes and texts, and prices will rise by £1 in April 2026. See all packages at www.snipca.com/55356.

Why has Microsoft made it harder to fix your PC?

It'll wipe your system restore points sooner than before

System Restore has long been Microsoft's most useful safety net, letting you roll back Windows to a time before something (often an update) messed it up. Now it has quietly lowered and narrowed that net by reducing how long restore points last for – from 90 to 60 days – giving you less time to fix problems with your PC.

The change came with June's Patch Tuesday update (www.snipca.com/55365), and affects only Windows 11 computers running build 24H2. Microsoft didn't give a reason, but if asked it would probably claim it benefits users by freeing up drive space.

Windows typically sets aside five to 15 per cent of drive space for restore points, which can easily add up to several gigabytes. Deleting them 30 days earlier frees up space for software, videos and music.

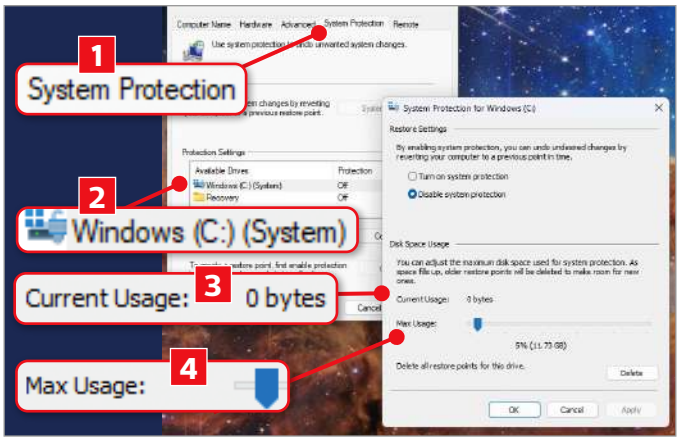
But Microsoft will benefit more than users. It sees System Restore as an outdated method of backing up because it relies on chunky files stored on your hard drive. If your drive fails, you'll seek help from Microsoft's support team. And tech giants really hate paying for customer support.

It's also part of Microsoft's long-term shift away from offline (local) services towards online. Specifically, it wants you to become dependent on OneDrive. You can't back up your entire Windows system to OneDrive, so it's not a replacement for System Restore. But Microsoft wants it to be your first choice for saving personal files. It reckons those are what you care about most, not the kind of Windows settings you create restore points to preserve. This is also partly behind its Windows 10 support U-turn (page 6).

And as you grow less reliant on System Restore, so you might come to use Microsoft's other online tools like 'Reset this PC' – which you'll find in System, then Recovery. This reinstalls Windows either from files stored on your PC or by downloading a fresh copy from Microsoft's servers. This doesn't offer a better solution than System Restore, but might make you slowly forget that it was ever necessary.

The best thing about the change is the simple fact that Microsoft has confirmed how long restore points last for – at least, in a way home users can understand. Until now, based on experience, most people assumed they lasted for 90 days – but the company never acknowledged it.

It's worth noting though that not all restore points lasted 90 days – and not all will now last 60. Windows deletes them when the disk space allocated for restore points is full, without even telling you.



Move the 'Max Usage' slider to allocate more disk space to your restore points

THE FACTS

- Microsoft has cut the limit for System Restore points from 90 to 60 days for Windows 11 computers running build 24H2
- Windows sets aside five to 15 per cent of disk space for restore points, but you can increase this in System Protection's settings
- Microsoft also has a 'Reset this PC' option but it reinstalls Windows completely rather than restoring your computer to an earlier state

To check how much disk space it's currently using, type Create a restore point into your Windows search bar, then click the System Protection tab (1 in our screenshot below left), and select your main drive 2. Now click Configure to see the current disk usage – it'll be zero bytes if you've not saved any restore points 3.

Now move the Max Usage slider 4 to increase drive space for restore points. Remember though that the more space you dedicate to restore points, the less you'll have for everything else. Click Apply then OK to confirm, and Delete if you want to remove all existing restore points.

Ultimately, this change is classic Microsoft: simplifying Windows, cutting costs by nudging you away from support, and pulling you deeper into its online services. The safety net's still there, but don't count on it lasting forever.

Protect your tech

Scams and threats to avoid, plus new security tools

WATCH OUT FOR...

Fake Apple, HP, Microsoft and Netflix support phone numbers

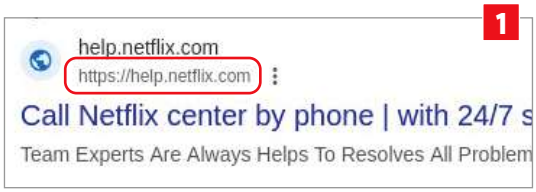
What's the threat?

Scammers are tricking victims into visiting real customer-support pages but showing a fake phone number to call. The scam begins with a fake advert in Google when you search for tech support. It looks convincing because it contains a genuine URL, such as https://help.netflix.com (see screenshot 1). Clicking it takes you to the real page for Netflix support but has a false number in the search box 2. Calling it takes you to a scammer who asks for your passwords and requests remote access to your PC.

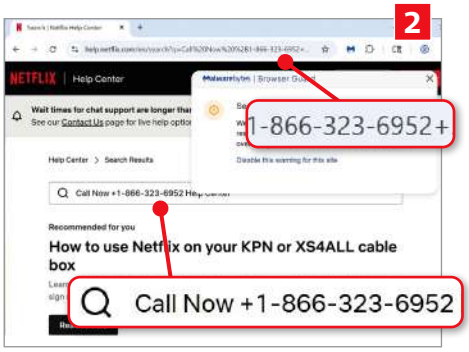
The scam was spotted by Malwarebytes' Senior Director of Research, Jérôme Segura, who took both screenshots. The second shows Malwarebytes' Browser Guard extension warning about the scam. The number in the screenshot is for the US, but these scams are likely to spread to other countries, including the UK. Segura also spotted fake tech-support numbers for Apple, HP, Microsoft and PayPal.

The scam works by including the fake phone number in the site's URL, which you can see at the top of the screenshot. This makes it appear automatically in the search box when you click the advert to visit the site.

1


help.netflix.com
https://help.netflix.com
Call Netflix center by phone | with 24/7 s
Team Experts Are Always Helps To Resolves All Problem

2



How can you stay safe?

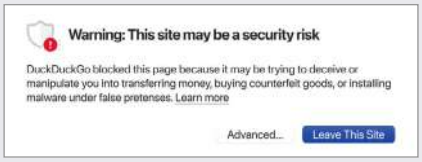
Google's search results are now so riddled with scams that we advise avoiding it entirely when looking for a website, software or online service. Instead, try DuckDuckGo (https://duckduckgo.com). With less than one per cent of web users it's a far less attractive target for scammers. If you want to find a site's support page, visit its homepage first by typing it into your browser (for example, www.netflix.com), then navigate to the correct section.

New tools | DuckDuckGo's Scam Blocker

As security tools get better at blocking malware and phishing attacks, cybercriminals are increasingly using fake adverts and virus alerts to trick you. These can be highly convincing, with URLs that impersonate legitimate software and retailers, and pop-ups that mimic genuine warnings.

DuckDuckGo is aware of this rising threat and has updated its browser's Scam Blocker accordingly. As well as conventional threats, it now warns you about "sham e-commerce sites" (fake online shops) and "scareware" (fake warnings of exaggerated threats). It also now detects surveys that promise you money, and cryptocurrency scams – see screenshot for what the warnings look like.

Scam Blocker is activated by default in the browser and runs in the background (on both the desktop and mobile version). To update its warnings DuckDuckGo uses data from independent security firm Netcraft, which it claims makes it safer than scam blockers in Chromium-based browsers because they share your browsing data with Google. You don't need an account to use the browser.


Warning: This site may be a security risk
DuckDuckGo blocked this page because it may be trying to deceive or manipulate you into transferring money, buying counterfeit goods, or installing malware under false pretenses. Learn more
Advanced...
Leave This Site

Read more about the new warnings at www.snipca.com/55292, and download the browser from www.snipca.com/55295. For more privacy-centred alternatives to Google read our Cover Feature – page 50.

ScamWatch
Readers warn readers

'Update Disney+ payment'

I haven't watched a Disney film since I was a little girl, so I was surprised to receive an email telling me that I had to update my payment to Disney+. I don't subscribe to any streaming service, so I knew it was a scam straight away. Still, I was a little worried that someone might have signed me up using stolen details, but no payments had come out of my bank account. Like most scans these days the email was well written, with no spelling mistakes, and had the correct Disney+ logo (see www.snipca.com/55241). I'm sure some genuine Disney+ viewers will fall for it.

Helen Meadows

Warn your fellow readers about scams at letters@computeractive.co.uk

Letters

Tell us what's on your mind

BT's Smart Hubs look fine, but no one ever uses them

Unlike Geoff Burgess (Letters, Issue 713), I don't mind the design of BT's Smart Hubs (pictured below). They're hardly design classics like red phone boxes, but they have a certain futuristic charm – if only because they remind me of the monolith in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

My objection to the Hubs is that no one ever uses them. There's one outside the shop where I work in Swindon. It's been there several years and I've never seen anyone use it to charge their phone nor make a call. I doubt anyone uses it for free Wi-Fi either. In fact, the only possible use I can think of is for me rushing outside to phone 999 when shoplifters strike!

Frankly, if the Incredible Hulk picked it up like a domino and threw it to Bristol I doubt anyone would notice it had gone.

Gareth Jones

Pay to avoid adverts? We've always done it with the BBC!

Lots of readers have complained recently about streaming services charging to remove adverts, but UK viewers have been doing this for years already. It's called the licence fee. We pay that to fund the BBC so it doesn't have to rely on adverts.

The BBC says this helps it maintain independence. Streaming services say it helps them fund quality content. But while the principle is different, the effect is the same: you're paying to remove adverts to receive a better service.

The other big difference is that we've never known a time without the licence fee. It feels normal paying for it. The mistake streaming services made was not having paid-for advert-free tiers when they launched. By introducing them many years later, they feel like a cynical money-grabbing ploy that alienates viewers.

Philip Frost

Will AI cause rise in dementia?

Much has been written recently about the benefits and risks of AI, but is there another hidden danger?

Now retired, dementia is a concern for me. Evidence suggests learning new skills may offer some defence against this terrible condition by creating new neural pathways within the brain, so I'm learning two new skills: speak French and play a musical instrument. Both activities are challenging, but apps can translate languages at the touch of a button, while AI can write and play songs. In effect, I'm learning skills made redundant through technology.

Increasingly people seem unable to carry out even simple home repairs and need to call in a professional. A motorist stranded with a puncture is no longer able to change a wheel. Cursive writing and spelling is becoming a skill lost to predictive texting and email. Phone calculators replace the need to be able to do even simple mental arithmetic and we don't even need to remember phone numbers any more.

Are we looking at a world where dementia rates rise in part because our brains are used for only the most basic functions? For everything else we can rely on technology and a hopefully benevolent AI.

Published in 1909, E.M. Forster's thought-provoking short story *The Machine Stops* describes a world where all of society's needs are met by an omnipotent machine. He anticipated much of what we now take for granted – video calls, online influencers, affordable world travel, all knowledge instantly available at the click of a button and so on. It's available as a free download (www.snipca.com/55242, pictured) and nor can we presume we'll have different ending to that foreseen in the book.

Paul Denyer

CA SAYS **While there's no firm medical evidence that using technology leads to dementia, a recent study by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology found that people relying on ChatGPT to write essays showed significantly less brain activity than those doing the task unaided. They were also less able to recall what they'd written afterwards – a clear sign that their brains were doing less thinking, learning and remembering. The researchers described this as "metacognitive laziness" – an over-reliance on automation that makes you feel productive but in fact dulls mental sharpness. Read more at www.snipca.com/55316.**

What's the Issue...?

I remember a big feature on switching from Google Chrome and Search to Brave's more private alternatives. When was that?

Paul Sykes

CA SAYS **Issue 679, page 62. Read it and the feature above on our 2024 Back Issue CD/ USB Stick: www.snipca.com/55252.**

CA SAYS **In Issue 686's Cover Feature 'Ditch Google for Brave'.**

I need to buy a new streaming device. When did you last explain what's on offer?

Ryan Weatherly

Like many readers I'm keen to stick with Freeview, but I've lost the issue where you revealed 'secret hacks' for it.

Darren Gregory

CA SAYS **In Issue 704's 'Ditch your old TV habits' Cover Feature. Buy a back issue from www.snipca.com/55251.**

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If we are unable to resolve your complaint, or if you would like more information about IPSO or the Editors' Code, contact IPSO on 0300 123 2220 or visit www.ipso.co.uk

Turn on TPM chip to run Windows 11

I've been wondering just how many PCs will be consigned to landfill because they don't meet Microsoft's requirements of a TPM 2.0 chip for upgrading to Windows 11? My own PC failed Microsoft's upgrade check because, allegedly, it didn't have this chip.

However, thanks to *Computeractive* I knew that on some PCs the chip is there, but just hasn't been enabled. So, I delved into my BIOS, and – lo and behold – my PC suddenly passed Microsoft's test (www.snipca.com/55259) and I now have a fully functioning Windows 11 PC.

I performed the same trick on a friend's PC. Without my intervention, they would have (reluctantly) retired their five-year-old machine and bought a new one. If my experience is extrapolated across the world there must be thousands – and possibly hundreds of thousands – of PCs that will be consigned to the bin, all because of Microsoft's flawed upgrade-checking tool.

Could you publish an article that explains to readers that they may not have to scrap their current PC just to get Windows 11? I'm not sure how you would convey this information as there are so many different combinations of motherboards and processors – and some PCs might pass the upgrade test on one item, but fail on another. But if you could help just one person it would surely help the environment – and save them a few pounds!

Ray Rolt

CA SAYS **Yes, we'll cover this in full detail over the next few months, as the 14 October deadline approaches. Microsoft's surprise U-turn does at least give Windows 10 users a 12-month reprieve (see page 6).**

ChromeOS Flex is more like Windows than Linux

Your article on switching from Windows 10 to Linux didn't mention another alternative – using ChromeOS Flex (www.snipca.com/55317, pictured right). I created a bootable USB stick of ChromeOS Flex and was able to try it in the same way as Linux Mint (https://linuxmint.com).

I found ChromeOS Flex much more like Windows, though all programs run through the browser. Booting back to Windows 10 was simple and didn't require BitLocker keys to be re-entered.

By comparison, I find the Linux Mint interface (with default settings) looks a little dated. But one major difference was I could find a Steam app in the Linux app store, but not in the ChromeOS app store. So before using ChromeOS Flex it's worth checking you can run your favourite programs within it.

Another consideration is that Linux Mint can be installed alongside Windows 10, but ChromeOS Flex will reformat the disk drive and therefore cannot be installed alongside Windows 10. I would love to hear more on your views of ChromeOS Flex as an alternative to Windows 10.

Kim Bragg

CA SAYS **ChromeOS Flex can work as a replacement for Windows 10 if your needs are simple – mainly web browsing, email and basic apps like Google Docs. It doesn't use many system resources, so runs well on older and low-powered computers.**

However, unlike the full ChromeOS, you can't run Android or Google Play Store apps on Flex. And, as Kim says, it wipes your drive, so you can't dual-boot as you can with Linux Mint. We'll explain the full differences between both versions of ChromeOS, and how they compare to Linux as alternatives to Windows 10, over the coming months.

STAR LETTER

Being polite to ChatGPT is like saying 'please' to your toaster

I understand what Joseph Zarb means when he says there's no harm in saying please and thank you to ChatGPT (Letters, Issue 712), and he sounds like a pleasant chap. But it really is completely and utterly pointless.

There is absolutely no humanity to ChatGPT or any AI chatbot. It has no emotion. It's incapable of it. There is no wizard behind ChatGPT's curtain who'll feel better if you're polite. Typing 'please' every time is as meaningless as asking your toaster to 'please' toast your bread when you push down the levers.

Yet, guess what? I've been known to shout at devices as though they could respond to my pleas to work properly. Many of us have probably had similar moments of desperation. Indeed, these outbursts precede computers – remember Basil Fawlty calling his car a "vicious b*****d" (www.snipca.com/55238)? So, am I a hypocrite? I treat malfunctioning devices like they can respond to my rantings, but never praise those that work well, let alone say please or thank you! That's also completely and utterly pointless.

Kevin Mellor

CA SAYS **Kevin's right that saying please to ChatGPT makes as much sense as whispering sweet nothings to your kettle. But people do it to make themselves feel better, not because they think the chatbot has a soul.**

He's also right that we're more likely to rant at devices than praise them. Excuse the amateur psychology, but it's probably because we've evolved to notice something going wrong more acutely than something quietly working. Though when tech baffles us, we're just as likely to utter a puzzled "¿Qué?".

The **Star Letter** writer wins a **Computeractive** mug!

Consumeractive

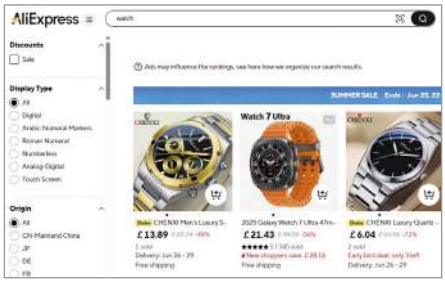
We stand up for your legal rights

Why won't AliExpress accept evidence of faulty watch?

LEAD CASE

Q I bought a watch from AliExpress (www.aliexpress.com, pictured), which arrived within two weeks. When I noticed that the GMT hand doesn't work, I contacted AliExpress for help. They asked me to send photos and videos, which I did, but they've told me this isn't sufficient evidence. I thought you could return faulty goods for a full refund with or without evidence, or doesn't this apply to AliExpress?

Darren Arbon



A Darren's suspicions are right – the UK's 30-day deadline to ask for a full refund doesn't apply to AliExpress. This is because, like Amazon Marketplace and eBay, it's a global selling platform, mainly for Chinese retailers to sell internationally. That means responsibility for getting a refund lies with the retailer (not AliExpress), and most of those will be based in China.

However, AliExpress does have a Buyer Protection scheme (www.snipca.com/55280) that seems fair and reasonable and abides by UK consumer law – though the 15 days it offers is roughly half of what Amazon and eBay offer. AliExpress's parent company, the Alibaba Group, has a registered office in London, but it hasn't responded to our requests to help Darren.

He now has two routes for a refund. First he could tell AliExpress that he contacted it within 15 days of the watch arriving, providing evidence when asked, and therefore is covered under its protection. But if he missed this deadline he'll need to go straight to the retailer and hope for the best.

While Chinese companies selling to the UK must obey British law (even if through an online marketplace), they are often hard to reach and reluctant to comply with requests for refunds.

CASE ONGOING

Can Amazon refuse to refund faulty power bank?

Q In February, I bought a £17.99 Charmast power bank with four built-in cables. It worked well until it suddenly stopped charging any devices. Amazon says I'm past the return date and must deal with Charmast directly because I'm also outside the limit of its Buyer Protection cover. Can it do that?

Charlotte Thomas

A It can because it's acting only as the selling platform for Charmast, which is an Amazon Marketplace seller based in China. Amazon's Buyer Protection usually lasts for 30 days from the day you receive the item. It sometimes helps beyond this, but it depends on the circumstances – and Charlotte can't rely on this.

Instead, she needs to contact Charmast directly for help, emphasising that it – not Amazon – is responsible for dealing with her. In the meantime, we'll contact Amazon anyway, pointing out that one Charmast power bank has already been recalled in the US because it posed a fire risk from overheating (www.snipca.com/55278). That might be enough to nudge Amazon into action and deal with Charlotte directly.

CASE ONGOING

CASE UPDATE

Tools site goes bust – new owners won't refund reader

We've got bad news for Terry McAlinden, who was seeking a refund for a faulty pressure washer he bought online from 'UKHS Tools to go' (see Issue 707). The company went bust in February, and he'll struggle to get back any of the £35 he paid.

Looking back, the signs were clear. No one at the company had contacted Terry for weeks and the website wasn't working.

The administrators FRP Advisory did find a buyer, which dropped 'UKHS' from the name and has a new URL (http://toolstogo.co.uk). More importantly, it's kept the assets but none of the liabilities. This means it doesn't have to pay refunds for actions taken by the previous owners, covering purchases made before 31 March.

On its help page (www.snipca.com/55381) the new owners say the only way to get a refund is to contact your bank, credit-card provider or PayPal and ask for a chargeback or payment dispute. You can also choose to register a claim with FRP Advisory by email (**cp.leicester@frpadvisory.com**) or phone (0116 303 3333).

Terry should try both options. He had taken the old company to the small claims court, but would have had to pay £108 to transfer his claim to the new owners. He should also ask the new company for help. It's offering a paid-for repair service for purchases made from the old site, but it might waive this if he catches them on a good day. There's no phone number though, only an email: **sales@toolstogo.co.uk**.

Should I have to pay £500 for leaving unreliable Voneus broadband?

Q I signed up to superfast broadband from Voneus (www.voneus.com) because it's cheap, but it took months to get connected. And now it always drops out after 55 minutes and some days I get nothing. I've done everything Voneus has asked for, but nothing has changed. Leaving will cost me a penalty of £500. Can you help?

Gregg Barton

A Hopefully yes, because it sounds like Voneus is in breach of contract for not providing the service it promised. That means Gregg would be allowed to leave without paying a penalty. He should now ask Voneus for a deadlock letter to outline what it has done to remedy this situation, and show it to the Communications Ombudsman (www.snipca.com/55274).

It will then investigate Gregg's claim and give a verdict. If he isn't happy with its decision he can instead take Voneus to the small claims court. Frustratingly, Voneus isn't signed up to Ofcom's compensation scheme (www.snipca.com/55276), so he can't expect automatic refunds.

We've asked Voneus for a response to Gregg's complaint. It has a decent reputation on Trustpilot, with a four-star rating (www.snipca.com/55275), though some recent reviews have complained about poor connections.

CASE ONGOING

Why is TalkTalk ignoring the 14-day cooling-off period?

Q When TalkTalk increased the price of my very basic broadband and phone package to £62 a month, I contacted them and was offered an alternative at £45. After agreeing to this I found a cheaper deal with Vodafone, but TalkTalk refused to cancel the contract despite the 14-day cooling-off period. Can it do this?

Colin Carter

A No it can't, but happily we didn't need to get involved because after first emailing us Colin got back in touch to say TalkTalk has agreed to cancel his contract without penalty.

Colin's correct that under the Consumer Contract Regulations he was given a 14-day cooling-off period. Some providers offer a longer period, so ask when you sign up. Sky, for example, gives you 31 days to cancel (see www.snipca.com/55277).

The right to cancel begins the day after you agreed to the contract. It remains in force even if the service has been activated, though providers can charge you any fees you've incurred during that time.

Incidentally, Colin could also have left TalkTalk without a fee because he claims it hadn't contacted him about the price rise to £62. Ofcom's rules state providers must inform customers between 10 to 40 days of any price rise.

CASE CLOSED

CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE

Stinkyink refunded my cartridges after printer died

I always buy both proprietary and compatible ink cartridges from Stinkyink (www.snipca.com/55240) and recently had to reorder a set of ink cartridges for my main Canon photo printer.

Following receipt of the cartridges the printer suffered a terminal fault. It meant I had a full set of cartridges plus five loose ones I'd previously received that were of no use to me.

Attempting to be environmentally friendly and not wishing to just place them in a recycling outlet (with a possible fire risk), I asked Stinkyink whether they could be disposed of safely. Much to my surprise they said if I returned them they would reimburse me the full price (not a small amount).

I consider this to be excellent customer service when they could have quite easily (and justifiably) done nothing.

Bob Paris

Has a company impressed you with its customer service? Please let us know: editor@computeractive.co.uk

Contact
Stinkyink

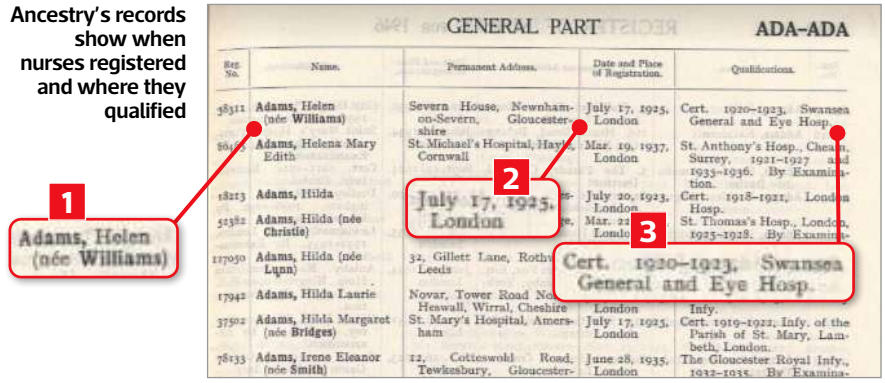
- **Email** sales@stinkyink.com
- **Phone** 01746 781 020

Grow Your Family Tree

If your ancestor followed in Florence Nightingale's footsteps, read **Richard Holt's** advice to...

Search Ancestry's nursing registers

If your ancestor was a nurse, you can trace their career through detailed registers held by the Royal College of Nursing (RCN). These records, digitised on Ancestry, cover nursing from the late 1800s to 1968. Most nurses listed are women, but male nurses – especially in mental health – also appear.


GENERAL PART
ADA–ADA
Reg. No.
Name.
Permanent Address.
Date and Place of Registration.
Qualifications.
38311 Adams, Helen (née Williams)
Severn House, Newnham-on-Severn, Gloucestershire
July 17, 1925, London
Cert. 1920–1923, Swansea General and Eye Hosp.
St. Michael's Hospital, Hayle, Cornwall
Mar. 19, 1937, London
St. Anthony's Hosp., Cheam, Surrey, 1921–1927 and 1933–1936. By Examination.
18213 Adams, Hilda
July 20, 1923, London
Cert. 1918–1921, London Hosp.
52382 Adams, Hilda (née Christie)
Mar. 22, London
St. Thomas's Hosp., London, 1925–1928. By Examin-
177050 Adams, Hilda (née Lunn)
32, Gillett Lane, Roth... Leeds
17942 Adams, Hilda Laurie
Novar, Tower Road No... Heswall, Wirral, Cheshire
London
Infy.
37502 Adams, Hilda Margaret (née Bridges)
St. Mary's Hospital, Amersham
July 17, 1925, London
Cert. 1919–1922, Infy. of the Parish of St. Mary, Lambeth, London.
78133 Adams, Irene Eleanor (née Smith)
12, Cotteswold Road, Tewkesbury, Gloucester-
June 28, 1935, London
The Gloucester Royal Infy., 1932–1935. By Examina-
1
Adams, Helen (née Williams)
2
July 17, 1925, London
3
Cert. 1920–1923, Swansea General and Eye Hosp.
Ancestry's records show when nurses registered and where they qualified

Browse the 1898-1968 collection

Ancestry's 'UK & Ireland, Nursing Registers, 1898–1968' collection includes several types of records spanning seven decades. The earliest are directories published by Sir Henry Burdett, like *Burdett's Official Nursing Directory (1894–1899)*, offering early nurse listings before professional bodies existed. Also included are membership registers from the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), founded in 1916. These cover 1916 to 1923 and list nurses who met membership criteria and paid fees.

However, the bulk of the records come from the State Register of Nurses, published annually by the General Nursing Councils from 1922 to 1968, before moving to a digital database. Separate registers exist for England and Wales (combined), Scotland and Ireland. Registration was initially voluntary, with nurses paying to appear, but became mandatory under the 1943 Nurses' Act.

If you know your ancestor's maiden name, enter this along with their surname when searching

The registers list nurses by name, including maiden names where relevant. Between 1922 and 1949 they include registration dates and numbers, permanent addresses, and training locations. After 1950, only newly qualified nurses were added, and addresses were omitted.

Read more about Ancestry's records by reading the 'Tracing Nurses' guide on the RCN website (www.snipca.com/55225).

Use maiden names to narrow your search

Visit www.snipca.com/55224 to search the records. You'll need an Ancestry subscription to access the full index and images of records. You can search by name and include filters such as location, keyword, year and registration date. I searched for Helen Adams, entering 'Adams Williams' in the Last Name box (see screenshot above left) because Williams was her maiden name.

Clicking Helen's 1946 entry (see screenshot above) confirmed her maiden name 1, and revealed she registered as a nurse on 17 July, 1925 2 and qualified from Swansea General and Eye Hospital 3. I then refined my search using the name 'Helen Williams' and her registration date, which led me to her 1928 register entry.

Your Genealogy Problems Solved

My great-uncle, Arthur McLean (born February 24, 1923 in Glasgow) was a merchant seaman. I came across a record stating he "deserted" his ship, the Waipawa, before it left New York for New Zealand in February 1946. What happened to immigrants to the US? Would he have completed any paperwork on arrival?

Fiona Clark

'Deserted' in this context means Arthur didn't continue on the vessel and probably joined another. There are some records at The National Archives that could help. The crew list in BT 381/3926 (www.snipca.com/55209) would record the reason for his discharge (Ship Official Number: 163657). Also, check to see if there is a record of his service in BT 382/1131 (www.snipca.com/55210) and/or BT 382/2649 (www.snipca.com/55211). There's a 'Seaman's Pouch' in BT 372/340/133 for an A. McLean born on 23 February, 1923, in Glasgow, who might be your uncle (www.snipca.com/55212).

Have a genealogy question for Richard? Email letters@computeractive.co.uk with 'Grow Your Family Tree' in the subject line.

Next issue: Search for merchant seamen

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WATER COOLED

SERIES

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Chillblast

HIGH PERFORMANCE PCs

Best Free Software

Robert Irvine recommends new programs that won't cost you a thing

IMAGE CONVERTER

Converseen 0.15

www.snipca.com/55409

What you need: Windows 7, 8.1, 10 or 11, macOS or Linux

There are few things more tedious than having to work through a huge set of images to make the same adjustment to each one individually. This task may involve converting the pictures to a different format, changing their file names or resizing images that are too large to share.

Converseen is an open-source tool that makes batch-processing images much easier. It supports more than 100 image formats, including JPEG, PNG, BMP, GIF, TIFF, WEBP, AVIF and the new JPEG XL (see 'What's All the Fuss About' in Issue 707, page 49).

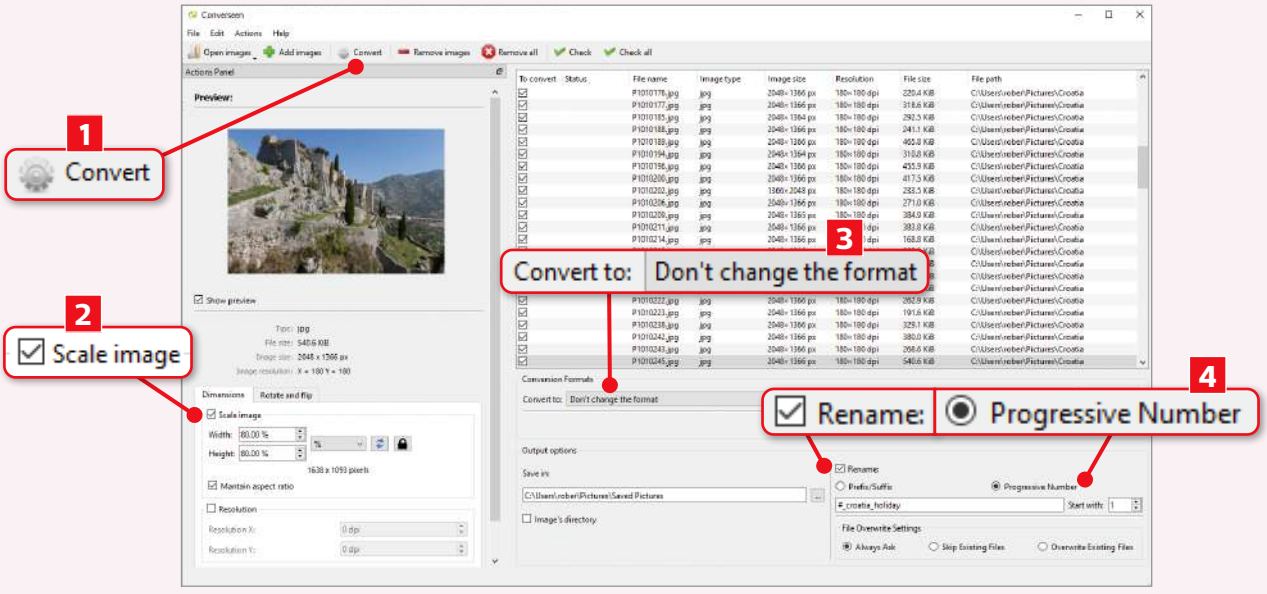
The main purpose of the program is to convert multiple images to another format in one go. Select a format in the 'Convert to' dropdown menu and click the Convert button on the toolbar. You can optionally click 'Images settings' to change the compression level and remove metadata. Equally useful is the option to rename images in bulk. This lets you give them the same name but with sequential numbers, for example '1_croatia_holiday', '2_croatia_holiday' etc.

Converseen can also resize large batches of images to your preferred dimensions and resolution, and rotate or flip them all.

Converseen can even convert PDFs into a series of images, though this requires installing the 32bit version of free third-party tool Ghostscript (www.snipca.com/55411). Once you've done that, click the File menu and choose 'Import PDF file'.

Although Converseen's basic interface won't win any prizes for design (or spelling – we spotted a few typing errors), it's straightforward to use and processes images very quickly. Usefully, it displays previews of files you select in a panel on the left.

Because Converseen is maintained by an independent developer, it may trigger a warning from your antivirus software when you install it. But it's completely safe to use, with a clean bill of health on VirusTotal (see www.snipca.com/55410), so just click 'More info' then 'Run anyway'.



1 All the main options in Converseen are accessible in its top toolbar. These include adding folders of images or individual files; selecting all or specific files (to deselect all, press Ctrl+Alt+J); and the all-important Convert button.

2 Use the settings in the Actions Panel to resize batches of images. Select 'Scale image' to specify the percentage by which to increase or decrease their size, and 'Maintain aspect ratio' to stop them being stretched or squashed.

3 Click the 'Convert to' dropdown menu to choose the format to convert your images to. To keep the same format while carrying out other adjustments such as resizing and rotating, select the 'Don't change the format' option.

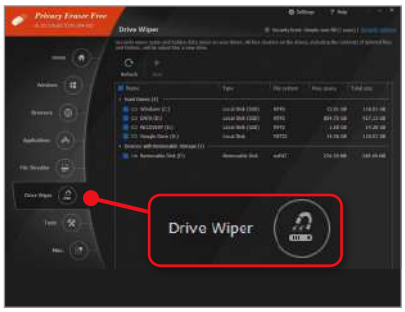
4 In the 'Output options' section, specify the folder you want to save converted images to – or choose 'Image's directory' to save them to the original folder. Select 'Rename' and 'Progressive number' to name and number the files.

PRIVACY CLEANER

Privacy Eraser Free 6.20.2

www.snipca.com/55388

What you need: Windows 7, 8.1, 10 or 11



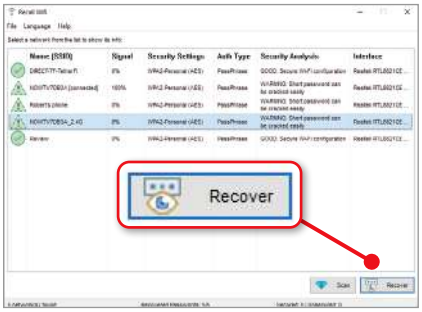
This excellent program for deleting traces of your PC and web activities has been updated with new cleaning options. Most notably, Privacy Eraser can now wipe temporary files left over by Microsoft 365 and Office 2024. Click 'Applications' in the left-hand menu and select those options to add them to scans and clean-ups. You'll only see them if you have the programs installed. Privacy Eraser now cleans the recycling bin in Windows 11 more thoroughly, to ensure files are permanently deleted when it's emptied. It has also improved its wiping of free space on FAT32 and exFAT drives when you use the Drive Wiper tool (see screenshot). The free version of Privacy Eraser only performs one 'pass' – upgrade to the Pro edition (£18.29 a year) for up to 35 passes.

NETWORKING TOOL

Recall Wifi 1.0

www.snipca.com/55401

What you need: Windows 7, 8.1, 10 or 11



Recall Wifi has nothing to do with the Recall feature on Copilot+ PCs but is a new tool for recovering forgotten Wi-Fi passwords. It scans your computer to list all the networks you've previously connected to, and analyses their security – for example, if they're protected by a strong or weak password, or open to anyone. Select a network and click the Recover button (see screenshot) to view its password. Recall Wifi is easy to use and can only access passwords already saved in Windows – it won't let you hack your neighbours' Wi-Fi. Right-click a network to connect to or delete it. Because it's a new program, Recall Wifi triggers a SmartScreen warning, but it's safe to use – with a clean bill of health on VirusTotal (www.snipca.com/55400) – so click 'More info' then 'Run anyway'.

£ SHOULD I PAY FOR...?

Choose the right version of software

Opera VPN Pro

www.snipca.com/55402

Price: £7 a month or £40 a year **Free trial:** 7 days

What you need: Windows 10 or 11, macOS or Android

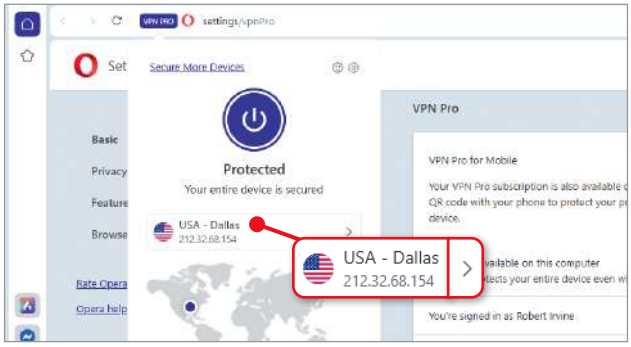
Opera was the first browser to offer a free VPN, though technically this is a proxy that only encrypts data within the browser. The paid-for Opera VPN Pro protects your whole device by encrypting all internet traffic. It was recently upgraded to improve its performance and offer more flexibility.

VPN Pro now lets you connect to servers in 48 locations – 15 more than previously – offering maximum speeds of 10Gbps, with no monthly data limit. That sounds impressive, but most paid-for VPNs have servers in over 100 countries.

You don't need to install any software to use VPN Pro, but it's only available through Opera's desktop and mobile browsers. Your subscription covers up to six devices, and you can try the service for free for a week.

Annoyingly, you need to enter payment-card details and accept auto-renewal conditions – ensure you cancel before the free trial ends or you'll be charged £40. That's cheap for an annual VPN subscription – working out at £3.33 a month – but it's not great value.

Although the upgraded VPN Pro integrates ExpressVPN's secure Lightway system, it doesn't include standard VPN features such as a kill switch or split tunnelling, or any configuration options. Other than protecting your entire device and letting you choose a location (see screenshot), it's essentially the same as Opera's free VPN.



OUR VERDICT: Don't pay for it

Opera's paid-for VPN may be faster, safer and more flexible than before, but it's very basic. You get lots more features and servers from Proton VPN Plus (see page 56), which also has a superior free version that protects your whole PC or phone.

What should I download?

We advise you which software and apps to use

What can I replace Skype with for international calls?

Q Just about every article I read about replacing Skype refers to calling family and friends who also had Skype. But I used Skype to make a smallish number of international calls to people I didn't know and many of these were businesses with landlines. In the early days, £10 of Skype credit lasted me years and more recently Skype credit was included with my Microsoft 365 package. What's the best replacement that lets me make around 20 to 30 mins of international calls a month?

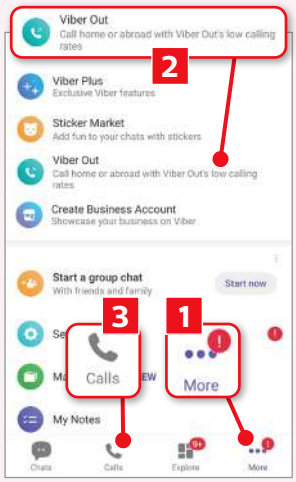
Chris Read

A Viber (www.viber.com) is the natural alternative to Skype for those like Chris who wish to make calls to overseas landlines and mobile phones. Its Viber Out packages work in the same way as Skype's call packages.

It's available as both a desktop program and phone app. To use the former you have to create an account with the latter, but if you want to just use the phone app you don't have to download the program. You'll find links for all at www.viber.com/download.

Here, we'll explain how to use Viber on your phone. Install then launch the app and tap Start Now. Enter your mobile-phone number to receive an activation code, and grant Viber access to any permissions it needs to access contacts and phone logs, as well as to make and receive calls.

On the main Viber app screen, tap the More button (1 in our screenshot) and choose Viber Out 2. Here you'll see a range of monthly plans, including an unlimited world plan covering 57 countries for £5.99 a month. There are also World Credits packages, charged in Euros at €4.99, €9.99 (+€1 free) and €19.99 (+€3 free) respectively.



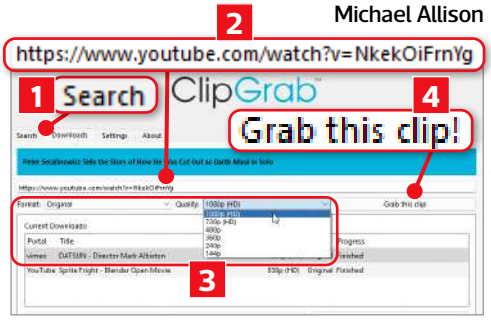
Now visit https://account.viber.com and enter the name of the country to see call costs. Buy credit then make your calls from the Calls section 3 of the app.

What's the best alternative to 4K Video Downloader?

Q Now that 4K Video Downloader (www.snipca.com/54387) has stopped updating its free version, is there another video downloader that will do the same but is completely free?

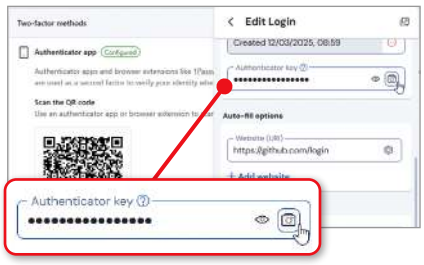
Michael Allison

A Try ClipGrab (https://clipgrab.org), which downloads videos from YouTube, Vimeo, Dailymotion and Facebook. Make sure you click the 'Download version without third-party offers' link to get the setup file. When prompted, click Continue to download the 'yt-dlp' file, which processes the videos. Open ClipGrab, then either search for YouTube videos 1 or paste the web address of a video 2, then choose your format and quality options 3 followed by 'Grab this clip!' 4.



Which authenticator apps also auto-fill passwords?

Q One of the things I liked about Microsoft Authenticator (www.snipca.com/55076) is that it stored and auto-filled your passwords. Microsoft has now removed both these functions from the app, so I'm thinking of replacing it. Are there any other authenticator apps that still do this?



Darren Shaw

A The simplest option is a password manager with a built-in authenticator, such as Bitwarden Premium. It stores both passwords and 2FA codes, as well as passkeys. You'll have to pay, but $10 (about £7.40) a year is great value. You can capture 2FA codes using either Bitwarden's phone app (via your camera) or the browser extension by clicking the camera button (see screenshot).

Email us your questions at letters@computeractive.co.uk

Named & Shamed

Keumars Afifi-Sabet puts the boot into tech villains, jargon-spouting companies and software trying to trick you

SOFTWARE WARNING!

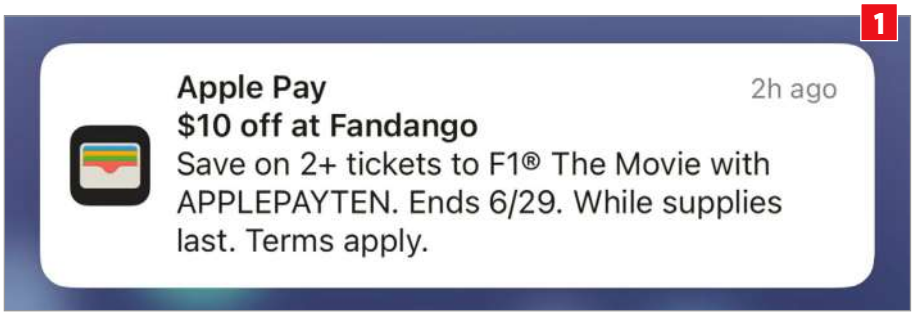
Apple's spammy *F1* offer drives iPhone users mad

When it comes to motor racing I'd much rather play Mario Kart on my Nintendo Switch than spend a day at Silverstone, so the new film *F1* has largely passed me by (at around 150mph).

But I'd have found it impossible to ignore if I were an iPhone user in the US. At the end of June Apple's Wallet app sent an alert offering a $10 discount on *F1* tickets through the movie-booking site Fandango – but only if you paid through Apple Pay (see screenshot 1). This couldn't have annoyed people more if Brad Pitt (the film's star) had spent hours tailgating them, before overtaking on the inside while flicking V-signs.

These alerts, called push notifications, appear on your screen and are usually for urgent updates, reminders or important messages from apps. They are most certainly not for promoting films.

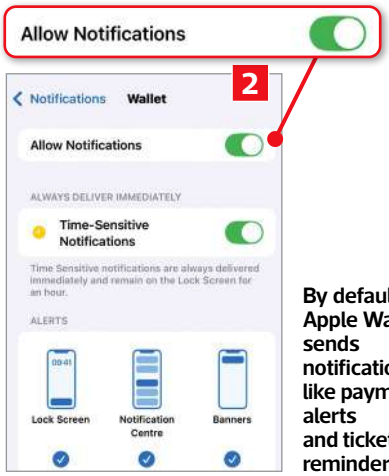
Apple Wallet normally sends you payment alerts, ticket reminders and more. These are turned on by default, as you'll see by opening your iPhone's Settings, then tapping Notifications followed by Wallet 2. These are useful alerts, but you can turn them off by tapping the green slider.


1
Apple Pay
2h ago
$10 off at Fandango
Save on 2+ tickets to F1® The Movie with APPLEPAYTEN. Ends 6/29. While supplies last. Terms apply.

It's the Pitts: Apple spammed iPhone users with ticket offers for the film *F1*

But what you *can't* turn off are promotional offers (or adverts as we used to call them). At least, not yet. Apple says it will let you disable these when iOS26 arrives this autumn. So it's obvious what's happening. Apple is testing the waters with this *F1* alert and will send us more once iOS26 is out – justifying this bombardment because it's added an option to turn them off.

And if they're successful in the US, expect them here too. Your phone will soon be as pushy as a car salesman.



By default, Apple Wallet sends notifications like payment alerts and ticket reminders

WHAT ARE THEY TALKING ABOUT?

WHAT THEY SAY

OpenAI www.snipca.com/55311

"A 'misaligned persona' feature mediates emergent misalignment. Using sparse autoencoders (SAEs), we decompose GPT-4o's internal computations into interpretable 'features', corresponding to directions in the model's high-dimensional activation space. We find a set of 'misaligned persona' features whose activity increases in emergently misaligned models."

WHAT THEY MEAN

We've misaligned the meaning of plain English by wrapping it in gibberish, but it suits our pretentious persona.

KEUMARS' VILLAIN OF THE FORTNIGHT

23andMe

If you're lucky, a data breach might only include an email address you've not used for years. If you're unlucky – like the 155,000 UK victims of a 2023 leak from DNA-testing site 23andMe – it could expose your name, year of birth, location, profile photos, ethnicity, health reports and family trees.

Hackers used passwords found in other data leaks (not related to 23andMe) to log into 14,000 23andMe accounts worldwide. From there, they stole details of around 6.9 million people linked as genetic relatives.

23andMe blamed the breach for its bankruptcy in March, and now the UK's Information Commissioner's Office has fined it £2.31m for "failing to implement appropriate security measures to protect the personal information of UK users" (www.snipca.com/55298). The company's new owners, TTAM Research Institute, says it has tightened security. It'll need to do more than that to win back trust.

MINI PC | **£447** from Amazon www.snipca.com/55273

Bosgame M4

Chip off the new block

This M4 mini PC is from a Chinese brand we haven't featured before (which you can find online at www.bosgame.com), but it sticks to the tried and tested format, with a traditional size and look. Here, we've tested the top-of the-range version that comes with with an AMD Ryzen 7 8745HS processor, 32GB of RAM and a 1TB SSD.

That's a lower specification than our current favourite mini PC, the GMKtec NucBox K11 (£700 from www.snipca.com/54341, see page 32), which has a more powerful AMD Ryzen 9 8945HS processor.

Unsurprisingly, then, in tests that push the processor to its limits, the M4 was noticeably slower. The difference between the two became even greater in tests that use less demanding software, such as office tools.

The M4 is still impressively powerful for the price, but its Ryzen 7 processor just can't keep up with the K11's Ryzen 9. Should you want to boost its capabilities in future, access – via the base panel – is a tad more complicated than some designs, but it's not difficult to do a memory or storage upgrade if you own a small screwdriver.

Its choice of connectivity is excellent. On the front there are two USB-C ports (one of which supports USB 4.0 speeds) next to two USB 3.2 sockets. On the rear you'll find two USB 2.0 ports for connecting a wired mouse and keyboard, along with two 2.5Gb Ethernet ports, an HDMI socket and a DisplayPort.

> "Handles most software well and offers great upgrade options should you need it"

Our only gripe is that the two USB-C ports on the front lack those small logos that indicate which one is USB 4.0. For the record, it's the one on the right, but the M4 itself provides no clues. On the right side there's also an OCuLink port. This can be used to connect an external graphics card, which will come in handy if you want to do more sophisticated gaming or video editing.

Bosgame actually produces its own eGPU Docking Station GVP7600 XT for £499 from www.snipca.com/55279 (pictured below left), which comes with an AMD Radeon RX 7600M graphics card. The port should work with other OCuLink-compatible devices, though.

While not built to the exacting standards of many NUC models, the plastic construction of the M4 is adequate for most uses. And its compact size means it can be easily mounted on to the back of a monitor.

If you can afford it, we think it's still worth paying extra for the power boost you'll get from the NucBox K11. That also has an OCuLink port, so can accommodate an external graphics card. For those with more modest requirements, however, the Bosgame M4 can easily handle most tasks, from office work to light gaming, and has some scope for upgrades if needed.

SPECIFICATIONS

Eight-core AMD Ryzen 7 8745HS processor • 32GB RAM • AMD Radeon 780M graphics • 1TB SSD • Wi-Fi 6E • Bluetooth 5.2 • 2x 2.5Gb Ethernet ports • 1x HDMI port • 1x DisplayPort • 2x USB-C ports (1x USB 4.0, 1x USB 3.2 Gen 2) • 2x USB 3.2 Gen 2 ports • 2x USB 2.0 ports • Windows 11 Pro • 48x129x129mm (HxWxD) • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/55273

VERDICT A great-value mini PC, though it may struggle if your needs become more demanding

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE GMKtec NucBox K11 £700 More powerful and a better all rounder, though you'll be paying a little more for that power and versatilty

LAPTOP | **£899** & **£999** from Microsoft www.snipca.com/55309

Microsoft Surface Laptop 13in

Better emulate than never

As you'd expect, the Surface Laptop 13in fully meets Microsoft's Copilot+ standard. Its Qualcomm Snapdragon X Plus processor includes a Neural Processing Unit (NPU) that enhances performance with AI-powered tools. The laptop also runs a special version of Windows that comes with exclusive AI features, such as the Cocreater app, which can generate impressive artwork from simple sketches.

> "A sleek laptop with a great screen and battery, but limitations will curb appeal"

Because it uses a Qualcomm chip, this Surface Laptop runs a different version of Windows from Intel- or AMD-based machines. As a result, it relies on an emulator for certain programs, and some software – particularly security tools and games – may not work at all. Qualcomm maintains a list of compatible software at www.snipca.com/54033, and you can also search the database at https://windowsonarm.org to check specific titles.

The laptop comes in three colours: light grey, dark grey, and purple. The £899 base model includes 16GB of RAM and a 256GB SSD, although at the time of writing it was only available in light grey. We tested the £999 version, which upgrades the SSD to 512GB. Given that neither RAM nor storage is upgradable, it's worth choosing the higher specification if your budget allows.

In our tests, general Windows performance was decent but lagged slightly behind our current top pick, the Dell Inspiron 14 (£749 from www.snipca.com/50079, see page 30). The Inspiron's Intel Core Ultra 7 155H processor offers broader compatibility with Windows software. In gaming, the Surface fell even further behind, delivering roughly half the frame rates of the Inspiron.

On the plus side, battery life was excellent – lasting over 17 hours in our simulated office test (two hours longer than the Inspiron), which easily translates to two full workdays or more without recharging, outlasting even the latest, similarly priced MacBook Air 13in models.

The Surface also benefits from Microsoft's sleek and lightweight design, giving it a more refined feel overall. However, port selection is limited: two USB-C, one USB 3.1, and a 3.5mm headphone jack. Neither USB-C port supports the USB 4.0 standard, though both can output video to a DisplayPort-compatible monitor.

The screen itself is significantly brighter than the Inspiron's, making it easier to use in bright conditions, while its keyboard and trackpad are a dream to type on.

SPECIFICATIONS

Eight-core Qualcomm Snapdragon X Plus 8C processor • 16GB RAM • Qualcomm Adreno X1-45 graphics • 13in 1920x1280-pixel 60Hz touchscreen • 512GB SSD • 2x USB-C ports • 1x USB 3.1 port • 1x 3.5mm audio jack • Wi-Fi 7 • Bluetooth 5.4 • Windows 11 Home • 15.6x286x214mm (HxWxD) • 1.22kg • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/55309

HOW WE TEST

Computeractive is owned by Future PLC, which employs a team of specialist technical reviewers. You'll often read references to our benchmark testing, which is a method of assessing products using the same criteria. For example, we test the speed of every PC and the battery life of every phone and tablet in exactly the same way. This makes our reviews authoritative, rigorous and accurate.

Future PLC also owns the magazines *PC Pro*, *T3* and *What Hi-Fi*, and the websites Laptop Mag (www.laptopmag.com), TechRadar (www.techradar.com) and Windows Central (www.windowscentral.com). This means we can test thousands of products before choosing the most relevant for *Computeractive*.

FAIR AND IMPARTIAL

Our writers follow strict guidelines to ensure the reviews are fair and impartial. The manufacturer has no involvement in our tests.

OUR AWARDS

We award every product that gets five stars our Buy It! stamp of approval. It means we were extremely impressed by the product, and we think you will be too.

Every product that gets a four-star review is given the Recommended award. We highly recommend these products, although they just fail to meet the high standard of our Buy It! winners.

PRICES

Our reviews contain a link to the best price we found online at the time of press.

VERDICT Microsoft's latest laptop is great to look at but doesn't provide enough of a performance boost to replace our current favourite

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Dell Inspiron 14 Plus £749 Doesn't have the stellar battery life or such a bright screen, but it's a better all-round performer and works with all Windows software

TABLET | **£529** from OnePlus www.snipca.com/55302

OnePlus Pad 3

Touching greatness

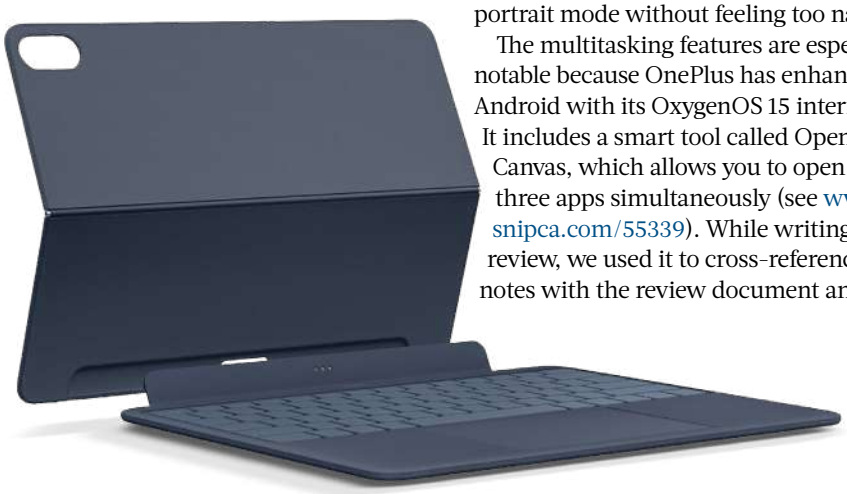
Android tablets are drawing closer to the quality of Apple's iPads with every new model that comes out, and that trend continues with the OnePlus Pad 3.

Its Pad 3 comes in two versions: 12GB RAM/256GB storage, and 16GB/512GB. Confusingly they both cost £529 at the time of writing, with the higher specified version that we're reviewing here being discounted from £599. Both models are being pitched as alternatives to the 13in iPad Air (£799 from www.snipca.com/55303) – Apple's most affordable 13in tablet.

> "Its mighty processor beats the MagicPad and so is our new favourite Android tablet"

This places the Pad 3 in the same league as our previous favourite Android tablet, the Honor MagicPad 2 (£400 from www.snipca.com/53150, reviewed in Issue 700). However, it surpasses the MagicPad with a significantly better specification and is our new favourite Android tablet.

The Pad 3's most notable edge is its processor. OnePlus has equipped its tablet with the Qualcomm Snapdragon 8 Elite, offering better speed and efficiency than the Snapdragon 8s Gen 3 chip found in the MagicPad. Our review model also featured more RAM (16GB) and a larger SSD (512GB).



Overall, this results in a smoother, more responsive Android experience. In our tests, the tablet handled everything we threw at it – from running multiple browser tabs and messaging on WhatsApp to streaming videos in floating windows. Even demanding games like *Call of Duty Mobile* ran without a hitch. It was much faster than the MagicPad.

Another key advantage is the larger 13.2in screen. If you're used to smaller devices like the standard 11in iPad, this bigger screen feels spacious and premium. It's also a high-quality panel – photos, videos and games look vibrant, with excellent contrast and punchy colours. Despite the increased size, the sharp 3392x2400-pixel resolution ensures everything remains crisp and detailed.

One unusual feature is its 7:5 aspect ratio. It's wider than the squarer 4:3 ratio used by iPads, but not as stretched as the 16:9 ratio common on TVs and monitors. This makes the Pad 3 well suited for multitasking with side-by-side windows, while still being comfortable to hold in portrait mode without feeling too narrow.

The multitasking features are especially notable because OnePlus has enhanced Android with its OxygenOS 15 interface. It includes a smart tool called Open Canvas, which allows you to open up to three apps simultaneously (see www.snipca.com/55339). While writing this review, we used it to cross-reference our notes with the review document and keep the OnePlus website open for checking device specifications – and it proved incredibly useful.

At the time of writing, the Pad 3 comes with a stylus (normally an additional £49.50) and a basic screen cover (usually priced £59). The Smart Keyboard (pictured below left), which also functions as a protective cover, is available separately for £84.50. We used the latter to write this review and found it to be a very handy accessory.

In our tests, the device's 12,140mAh battery powered continuous video playback for up to 17 hours – a solid runtime that should cover most long journeys. We managed six hours of screen time in a single working day, with about 35 per cent charge remaining. While that won't be quite enough to last through a second full day of use, it provides ample time before you need to plug it in again.

SPECIFICATIONS

Eight-core Qualcomm Snapdragon 8 Elite processor • 16GB RAM • 512GB storage • 13.2in 3392x2400-pixel LTPS screen • 13-megapixel rear camera • 8-megapixel front-facing camera • Wi-Fi 7 • Bluetooth 5.4 • Android 15 • 209x290x5.9mm (HxWxD) • 675g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/55302

VERDICT An attractive Android tablet with a huge screen that's terrific value for money compared with Apple's rival iPads

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Honor MagicPad2 £400 Now even cheaper than its price at launch, but can't quite match the Pad 3's quality

WI-FI ROUTER | **£80** from Currys www.snipca.com/55379

Acer Predator Connect W6x

Net gains

In Issue 713 we reviewed the Predator Connect T7 (£170 from www.snipca.com/55194), a tri-band router that's ideal for those who want to make full use of their Wi-Fi 7-enabled devices. Acer stablemate the W6x is a more modest alternative and costs less than half the price. For one thing it's dual-band, operating on the 2.4GHz and 5GHz frequencies only and therefore lacks the high-speed 6GHz band that can be used by newer, compatible devices.

Unlike the sleek tower-style build of the T7, the W6x conforms to a more traditional design, with a low-profile black body (50x270x187mm, HxWxD) and six long (170mm) antennas rising from the sides and rear.

The rear panel (pictured below) features a 2.5Gb Ethernet port for the incoming internet traffic and four Gigabit Ethernet ports for connecting to other devices. There's also a USB-A port for attaching network storage devices, for example.

Setup and management of the router is handled via the Predator Connect app, which provides several handy features, including the option to combine the two networks for ease of use or keep them separate so you can assign individual devices to each.

You can also create a guest network, block internet access for individual devices and set up parental controls. And we like that it offers basic security features for free. This is all useful but we found the app complicated to use and would have appreciated a more friendly interface.

In our tests, we compared the W6x with our office router, which manages a top speed of around 80Mbps on the 2.4GHz band and 120Mbps on 5GHz with devices in the same room. That's well short of the maximum 150Mbps speeds promised by our broadband provider. In contrast, the W6x breezed along at the maximum 150Mbps in both bands.

We have an office at the back of the building that can't be reached reliably by our resident router. Again, the W6x had it covered, although its 2.4GHz band dipped to 70Mbps. On the 5GHz network, however, it maintained speeds of up to 150Mbps. That's impressive for the price.

We still prefer the Asus RT-AXE7800 Wi-Fi 6E router (£180 from www.snipca.com/52957, see page 33) with its faster 6GHz option, but the W6x represents great value.

SPECIFICATIONS

Dual-band 2.4GHz/5GHz Wi-Fi 6 • 1x 2.5 Gigabit WAN port • 4x Gigabit Ethernet ports • 1x USB port • 50x270x187mm (HxWxD) • 880g • Two-year warranty www.snipca.com/55379

VERDICT A dual-band Wi-Fi 6 router that achieves impressive speeds and wide-ranging coverage for an affordable price

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Asus RT-AXE7800 Wi-Fi 6E router £180 An excellent mid-range Wi-Fi 6E router with an additional 6GHz network that provides faster speeds for compatible devices

CHOOSE THE RIGHT SPECS

Touchscreens

What are they?

Touchscreens are panels that let you interact directly with what's on screen by touching it with a finger, stylus or other object.

How do they work?

Most touchscreens are capacitive, meaning they have a transparent conductor between the screen's surface and the pixels below that uses the conductive properties of human skin to detect whether the surface is being touched. There are also resistive touchscreens on printers and sat-navs that aren't as sensitive or responsive. These require you to apply more pressure to the screen's surface, which then bends to make a connection with another layer below. These screens can't detect more nuanced gestures such as swipes.

What are the specs?

The most important component is the number of multi-touch points on the screen, which you'll find in the device's specifications. For example, the Microsoft Surface Pro 12in (£799 from www.snipca.com/55142, reviewed in Issue 713, pictured below) has a 10-point multi-touch capacity, which means it can differentiate individual touches from up to 10 fingers and thumbs. If you prefer styluses, use one that's been specifically made for your device. A generic stylus – typically made of rubber – emulates the properties of skin, but styluses designed for a particular device can also detect the amount of pressure that's being applied to the screen.

Can I change it later?

You can replace a broken touchscreen, but it's unlikely that you'd be able to upgrade it, as touchscreens are tightly integrated into the device's hardware and software.

EXTERNAL SSD | **£160** from Amazon www.snipca.com/55342

Crucial X10 2TB

Less isn't more

We were impressed by the speed and sturdy design of Crucial's X10 Pro when we reviewed it back in Issue 670. This cheaper version offers a greater choice of storage capacities than the Pro – aside from the 2TB we review here there's 1TB (£106), 4TB (£260), 6TB (£360) and 8TB (£530). The Pro maxes out at 4TB.

Crucial quotes read speeds of up to 2,200MB/s and write speeds of 2,000MB/s, which matches the Pro, though it lacks its predecessor's hardware encryption option. That need not be a deal breaker because you can encrypt files using third-party software, though it's not as convenient.

We saw speeds approaching Crucial's quoted levels in our benchmark tests (1790MB/s write speeds, for example), but only because we used a USB-C port that supports the USB 3.2 Gen 2x2 standard. These aren't as common as the slower Gen 2 ports, so check your connected device's specification. Those who have connected devices with USB 4.0 ports will get even faster speeds from compatible drives like the Corsair EX400U (£185 for 2TB from www.snipca.com/53939), which can transfer at twice the rate.

The X10 is the same size as the X10 Pro but comes in a cheaper plastic case rather than an aluminium shell. The design is less angular with rounded corners and edges, while the lanyard hole that was on one corner now passes through the centre of one of the shorter sides. It comes with a 20cm USB-C-to-USB-C cable, which is a little short, and means that if you want to connect it to an old-style regular USB 3.2 port you'll need to find an adapter.

The plastic case means it can survive a three-metre drop on to a carpeted floor, while the Pro was only guaranteed to withstand two metres, though the warranty has been reduced from five years to just three years. The X10 also has a better ingress protection rating of IP56, which means it's more resistant to water.

With the X10 costing only £10 less than the X10 Pro for the same speed and capacity, we'd recommend buying the Pro version. Its hardware encryption comes in handy for ultra-sensitive files. Without it you'll have to use software to encrypt files.

SPECIFICATIONS
Available in 1TB, 2TB, 4TB, 6TB and 8TB capacities • USB-C 3.2 Gen 2x2 connector • Speeds up to 20Gbps • No software included • 9.9x50x65mm (HxWxD) • 42g • Three-year warranty www.snipca.com/55342

VERDICT A fast external SSD if you have an available USB 3.2 Gen 2x2 port, but it suffers from losing hardware encryption without much of a price reduction

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE
Corsair EX400U £185 More expensive, but it supports USB 4.0 speeds so can transfer data at twice the speed

WHAT SHOULD I BUY? We solve your buying dilemmas

Can you suggest a camera to keep an eye on our cats?

Q **I am going away in December and would like to install an internal security camera or two, so we can view the feed on our phone to check in on what our cats are up to. What would you recommend?**

Hugh Rogers

A Most indoor security cameras have a fairly wide field of view, but if you really want to keep an eye on your cats, it might be worth buying a camera that can pan and tilt. This lets you control the camera and point it toward corners of the room that would otherwise be out of sight.

We recommend the Tapo TC70 (£24.99 from www.snipca.com/55373, pictured), which averages 4.5 out of 5 stars on Amazon from nearly 20,000 reviews.

It has a motorised base that rotates it through 360 degrees, while the camera unit can tilt up to 114 degrees. It can follow movement around the room automatically.

There's a microSD card slot you can use to store recorded footage if you want to avoid extra charges, or online-storage subscriptions start from £2.09 a month for a single camera if you pay for a year up front.

Do you need advice on what you should buy? Email us at letters@computeractive.co.uk

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MOUSE | **£88** from Contour Design www.snipca.com/55320

Contour Design Unimouse

Right angle

This wireless ergonomic mouse has a unique split-folding, adjustable design that lets you set the exact angle for your wrist. With a range between 35 and 70 degrees, it lets you start with a flatter angle and gradually increase it – ideal if you're transitioning from a traditional mouse. The hinge mechanism for adjusting this angle can be quite stiff, but it remains stable while in place, and it doesn't wobble.

While it looks basic, the Unimouse feels premium thanks to textured padding where your fingers rest. Overall, it works well, gliding effortlessly across surfaces with well-placed main buttons that are easy to reach.

The companion Windows app offers a range of customisation tools, allowing you to reassign button functions and create shortcuts to streamline common tasks.

After a full day of use, one of the five LED indicators turned off, suggesting the battery had dropped by at least 20 per cent. That's not particularly impressive, but the Unimouse does include a USB cable for wired use – so you can keep working while it charges. There's also a wired version available for £83 if you'd rather not have to recharge.

At £88, the Unimouse is relatively expensive – especially with alternative ergonomic models from the likes of Logitech available for around £50. However, most of those are fixed-angle designs.

SPECIFICATIONS
Connect using 2.4GHz wireless or USB-C • Right- or left-handed options • Seven buttons • 4,000dpi • 56x119x76mm (HxWxD) • 141g • One-year warranty
www.snipca.com/55320

VERDICT A comfortable and customisable ergonomic mouse that can sit at the perfect angle for your wrist

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Logitech Lift Vertical Ergonomic Mouse £50 A cheaper option, though you can't adjust the angle it sits at

FITNESS WATCH | **£59** from Amazon www.snipca.com/55321

Samsung Galaxy Fit3

Give it a wrist

Samsung doesn't typically focus on budget products, so this fitness watch stands out. Its £59 price tag significantly undercuts rivals such as our current favourite, the Fitbit Charge 6 (£140 from www.snipca.com/48198).

Samsung includes all its services and its Health app in the price, so there are no hidden subscriptions needed to access more services. Note, however, that there's no iPhone version of its app, so it's for Android users only for now.

The Fit3 has a large, bright AMOLED screen that can accommodate plenty of data. It monitors a range of fitness stats including steps walked, calories burned, heart rate, stress levels and sleep. It also offers smartwatch-style notifications and music controls, plus weather information and a collection of customisable watch faces. Navigating through screens is easy and enjoyable thanks to its responsive touchscreen and clear menu design.

What the watch can't do on its own is track your exercise via GPS. You can still do this by connecting it to a smartphone, but if you head out and leave your phone behind, the watch will try to guess the distance travelled. It means that while we found features such as measuring heart rate worked well, it was inaccurate when judging distances without a phone, which is the main reason why we still prefer the Charge 6.

Samsung says the battery lasts 13 days in full. In our test it lasted 10 days, during which we tracked three short runs and wore the watch overnight. Recharging fully from zero took 68 minutes.

SPECIFICATIONS
1.6in 256x402 pixel AMOLED screen • Up to 13 days' battery life • Bluetooth 5.3 • IP68 ingress protection • 43x29x9.9mm (HxWxD) • 18.5g • One-year warranty
www.snipca.com/55170

VERDICT A great-value fitness watch that's easy to use, but you'll need a phone to use GPS

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Fitbit Charge 6 £140 More expensive, but better at tracking exercise without a smartphone

TV STREAMING STICK | **£30** from Roku www.snipca.com/55403

Roku Streaming Stick

Cheap thrills

Computer active RECOMMENDED ★★★★★

The Roku Streaming Stick is the Full HD model in Roku's recently updated range of TV-streaming products – and it's also the cheapest. We reviewed the Streaming Stick Plus (£40 from www.snipca.com/54904) in Issue 711, which is the better option for those with a 4K TV set. This 1080p model sacrifices resolution and lacks compatibility with HDR, but it's ideal if you want to upgrade an older set to a smart TV.

> "A neatly designed streamer that's easy to use and great value"

Roku's prices are competitive, especially compared with its closest rival in this price range, Amazon's Fire TV Stick. While the Fire TV Stick HD costs £10 more and also offers 1080p resolution, it does include HDR support. However, if HDR is important to you, it's worth considering the Roku Streaming Stick Plus – this supports HDR and 4K, making it more future-proof if you plan to upgrade your TV later.

The Streaming Stick shares an almost identical design with the Plus version, featuring the same slim, rounded casing that fits neatly into an HDMI port without blocking nearby connections. The only noticeable difference is cosmetic – this model has a printed Roku logo, whereas the Plus features an embossed one.

It includes a power cable designed to connect from the Stick's USB-C charging port to a USB-A port on the back of your TV – a neat solution that eliminates the need for cables running to a mains socket. However, if your TV lacks an empty USB port, you'll need to provide your own power adapter.

The Streaming Stick features the same user-friendly interface found on all Roku devices. At the top, you'll see a few viewing suggestions, but the main home screen remains clean and fully customisable, with a grid of tiles for your apps. All major UK catch-up services and popular subscription platforms are available to add.

We appreciate the interface's simplicity – especially compared with the more cluttered layouts of Google TV and Fire TV. However, it doesn't feel quite as smooth or responsive as on the Plus version or other higher-end Roku models.

The remote has a slightly bulky design that makes it comfortable to hold. It features dedicated play/pause buttons and a voice assistant button that lets you use voice commands by holding it down.

SPECIFICATIONS

Up to 1080p (1920x1080-pixel) resolution • 60fps • HDMI connection • USB-C port for power • Wi-Fi 5 • 20x94x11.4mm (HxWxD) • 26g • One-year warranty
www.snipca.com/55403

VERDICT An inexpensive way to add Roku's excellent TV-streaming interface to a 1080p TV set

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Roku Streaming Stick Plus £40 A slightly more costly option for those who want 4K resolution *and* HDR support

DO I REALLY NEED...

A Chromebook with AI?

What is it?

The Lenovo Chromebook 14 (from £549, pictured) is powered by the new MediaTek Kompanio Ultra processor. Equipped with an NPU and GPU, it delivers impressive AI-processing capabilities that outperform most Copilot+ Windows PCs with a rating of 50 TOPS.

How does it work?

It features a special edition of ChromeOS with a version of Google's Gemini AI that can run locally on the device, eliminating the need for online processing. It also has handy features like Smart Grouping, which uses AI to organise tabs, documents and apps by category. It can intelligently extract text from images and includes a new AI-powered photo-editing tool in the Gallery app.

What's the catch?

We can't really see one. The price is reasonable and it's well equipped, including its smart OLED screen.

So can I do without it?

Yes, but expect to see these AI tools on more Chromebooks soon

NEXT ISSUE

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Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

LAPTOP

PRICE DROP

Dell Inspiron 14 Plus
£599 from www.snipca.com/55245
Tested Issue 683

This is back as our favourite as its replacement, Asus's Vivobook 16 Flip, seems to have sold out. It remains an excellent laptop, with a fast processor, 16GB RAM, 512GB SSD and a 14in 2240x1400-pixel screen.

ALTERNATIVE PCSpecialist 16 Fusion British-made laptop with superb screen and built for advanced AI tasks. £996 from www.snipca.com/55094

DESKTOP PC

Palicomp AMD Cobra
£400 from www.snipca.com/43515
Tested Issue 643

This fast PC is a mouth-watering bargain, with 16GB of RAM, a 2TB SSD and a six-core processor – though it lacks USB-C ports and built-in Wi-Fi.

ALTERNATIVE Wired2Fire Ultima WS Home Office Workstation Blisteringly fast PC, powered by an overclocked eight-core processor and 1TB SSD. £675 from www.snipca.com/41500

APPLE iPAD

Apple iPad 11
£329 from www.snipca.com/54887
Tested Issue 711

With a faster processor and increased storage (from 64GB to 128GB), the 2025 edition of the iPad is simply stunning. Battery life is over 11 hours, which is better than any other iPad, including more expensive models.

ALTERNATIVE iPad mini 7 The 2024 version of the mini improves the colour accuracy on the 8.3in screen and has a more powerful processor. £499 from www.snipca.com/52573

ANDROID TABLET

NEW ENTRY

OnePlus Pad 3
£529 from www.snipca.com/55302
Tested Issue 714

With an incredibly fast processor and stunning 13.2in screen, this is the best ever Android tablet, and rivals the iPad Air. At launch both the 12GB RAM/256GB and 16GB/512GB versions were £529, so grab the latter as soon as possible.

ALTERNATIVE Samsung Galaxy Tab S9 Has a much brighter screen than its predecessor, making it ideal for watching TV. Also has a faster processor, speeding up tasks. £649 (128GB) from www.snipca.com/50039

APPLE iPHONE

Apple iPhone 16
£799 from www.snipca.com/53981
Tested Issue 695

This is the best new iPhone for years, boosted by a processor that's as fast as much more expensive models. The screen is excellent, while the new Camera Control button gives lots of ways to take photos.

ALTERNATIVE iPhone 14 Now heavily discounted, this remains a speedy phone with great features and an impressive camera. £499 (128GB) from www.snipca.com/53982

ANDROID PHONE

PRICE DROP

Samsung Galaxy A56
£424 from www.snipca.com/54585
Tested Issue 709

The successor to Samsung's mid-range A55, this has a stunning screen and lasted over 29 hours in our tests. It's faster than Google's Pixel 7a in all tasks, and has AI-powered photo tools.

ALTERNATIVE Google Pixel 7a Cheaper version of Google's flagship phone, it uses AI to improve photos and lasts 10 hours. Has fast processor and 8GB RAM. £279 from www.snipca.com/55250

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Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

MINI PC

GMKtec NucBox K11
£700 from www.snipca.com/54341
Tested Issue 707

A fast and powerful machine, but what really sets it apart are the ports letting you upgrade it – such as the OCuLink connection for graphics cards. Also has six USB ports, 32GB RAM (upgradeable to 96GB) and a 1TB SSD.

ALTERNATIVE Geekom A8 Too small to accommodate many ports, but makes up for it with a 2TB SSD and SD card slot for adding storage. £799 from www.snipca.com/55383

EBOOK READER

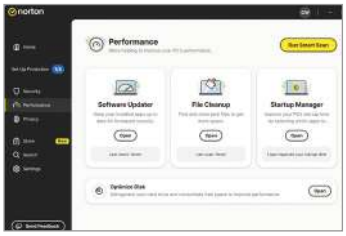
Amazon Kindle Paperwhite
£160 from www.snipca.com/52730
Tested Issue 698

The sixth version of the Paperwhite has a larger screen (7in), faster page turns and longer battery life (12 weeks – up from 10). Its glare-free finish means you can easily read it in bright sunlight, and its 300ppi resolution makes text a joy to read.

ALTERNATIVE Kobo Libra Kobo's first colour e-reader, with over 4,000 tones to make illustrations and photos leap out. £190 from www.snipca.com/50192

SECURITY SOFTWARE

Norton 360 Deluxe 2025
£14.99 from www.snipca.com/54797
Tested Issue 629



Norton has always performed strongly in our antivirus tests, regularly making the top three. Owned by US firm Gen Digital, it's available at a discount on our Software Store. Use the link above for a three-device, two-year licence at a special discount price. Other versions are available.

ALTERNATIVE Bitdefender Total Security Another top performer that we're offering at a discount. £24.99 from www.snipca.com/41141

WEBCAM

Obsbot Meet SE
£79 from www.snipca.com/54725
Tested Issue 710

The Meet SE from Chinese firm Obsbot beats the picture quality of our previous favourite, Logitech's C925e. Colours are vibrant and accurate, with terrific detail even in poor lighting thanks to a relatively wide aperture.

ALTERNATIVE Creative Live Cam Sync 4K Affordable 4K webcam with high-quality video that can also capture voice from a distance. £45 from www.snipca.com/51577

PC MONITOR

PRICE DROP

Philips 27E1N1600AE
£188 from www.snipca.com/54190
Tested Issue 692

An affordable 27in monitor with a sharp resolution, impressive image quality and a sturdy build. It has an HDMI port, a USB-C port and two USB 3.0. The hefty base means you can raise and tilt the monitor easily using just one hand.

ALTERNATIVE Asus ROG Strix XG27ACS Another excellent 27in monitor with 1440p resolution and a fast refresh rate aimed at gamers. £229 from www.snipca.com/49898

SOLID-STATE DRIVE

Corsair MP600 Pro LPX 1TB
£80 from www.snipca.com/52658
Tested Issue 630

In our tests, this M.2 SSD hit speeds of 7,364MB/s and 6,870MB/s when reading and writing data – astonishingly fast scores. It's compatible with the new PCIe 4.0 standard, which is twice as fast as PCIe 3.0. The 1TB model costs £80; 2TB costs £142.

ALTERNATIVE Crucial MX500 500GB As fast as an SSD can get in the traditional 2.5in SATA format, this is a great-value upgrade. £70 from www.snipca.com/53808

COMPETITION

Win 1 of 2... Acer Predator Connect T7 Wi-Fi 7 routers

Winner of a Recommended award in Issue 713 (page 25), Acer's Predator Connect T7 is an incredibly fast and stable Wi-Fi 7 router, delivering speeds up to 5,764Mbps (5.8Gbps). This makes it perfect for gaming, streaming video in 8K and downloading massive files in a flash.

As a tri-band router, it uses the 2.4GHz, 5GHz and 6GHz bands to regulate traffic on your network. And there's even a 2.5Gbps Ethernet port, if you prefer to use a wired connection. Acer's Load Balance and Failover features ensure uninterrupted performance across your mesh network, for a superior online experience.

With a high-powered quad-core 1.5GHz ARM Cortex processor, 1GB RAM and 512MB flash storage, the Predator Connect T7 can handle multiple tasks simultaneously with ease, resulting in quicker load times, smoother streaming and a more responsive internet experience.

To enter the competition, answer the question at www.snipca.com/55344 and submit your details by midnight Tuesday 29 July. Good luck!

You can buy the **Acer Predator Connect** T7 Wi-Fi 7 router for £169.99 from Currys (www.snipca.com/55194). For more Acer products, including laptops, PCs and monitors, visit www.acer.com.

PRINTER

PRICE DROP

HP OfficeJet Pro 9135e
£190 from www.snipca.com/53101
Tested Issue 700

A versatile cartridge printer-scanner for the home office that makes printing jobs quicker and easier than most of its inkjet rivals. Colour prints cost a reasonable 6p per page, while mono costs 2p. Printed text is superb and photos are pretty good too.

ALTERNATIVE Epson EcoTank ET-1810
Not the fastest printer, but comes with enough ink for 4,500 mono and 7,500 colour pages. £150 from www.snipca.com/52191

SMART TV

Bush 43UT24SB
£180 from www.snipca.com/53637
Tested Issue 703

It's rare to find a 43in TV this cheap, especially with a superbly bright screen. Sound isn't bad either, and it offers most of the streaming services, including Freely. Its TiVo operating system is very easy to use.

ALTERNATIVE Samsung CU8000
More expensive, but has a 55in LED screen and sharp 4K resolution. Connectivity is good, with three HDMI and two USB ports. £419 from www.snipca.com/52110

ROUTER

Asus RT-AXE7800
£180 from www.snipca.com/52957
Tested Issue 665

This router has Wi-Fi 6E, so will be capable of the fastest possible speeds on the 6GHz network over the next few years. It has five Ethernet ports and also a USB 3.0 port to connect a hard drive or NAS drive.

ALTERNATIVE Synology WRX560
Our previous favourite remains an excellent choice, delivering speeds of up to 791.5Mbps. Add more units to set up mesh Wi-Fi. £228 from www.snipca.com/52051

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HOW TO...

Switch from Pocket to save and read web articles

by Nik Rawlinson

What you need: Instapaper or Matter account **Time required:** 30 minutes

Over the past 18 years, Pocket (www.getpocket.com) has become one of the most convenient ways to keep track of what you'd like to read online. Owned by Firefox maker Mozilla, it not only lets you pin online articles to return to later, but also saves the article's contents to your account. That means they'll still be available when you have time to read them, even if the original piece disappears in the meantime.

Many of us at *Computeractive* team use it daily, and the list of articles we'd like to read 'some day' runs to hundreds of items. And that's a problem. Why? Because in May, Mozilla gave users two months' notice that it was closing the service. Many of us hoped it would be snapped up by someone else, but at the time of writing (mid June) that's not yet happened. So, with so many unread articles that we don't want to lose track of, we've been looking for alternatives.

After trying out several options, we've settled on two: Matter and Instapaper. Each offers a broadly equivalent service and, like Pocket, has a free tier that suits most of our needs.

Here, we'll explain what's happening to Pocket, how you can transfer your Pocket reading list and, if you've never used Pocket before, how Matter or Instapaper can help you keep track of what you want to read online. That way, the urge to sit back and read something right now won't interrupt what you really should be doing.

As Mozilla explains in its guide to Pocket's closure (www.snipca.com/55190), it stopped users saving new content on 8 July. All you can do now is export your saved data before 8 October. On that date, everything will be deleted, including your account. There's no need to manually delete your account to protect your data.

If you've paid for Pocket Premium, you may be eligible for a refund, depending on when you last made a payment and how much time is left on your subscription. If you have a monthly subscription, Mozilla won't have taken any further payments after announcing the service's closure, so you'll be able to continue using the premium service for the full term that you've paid for.

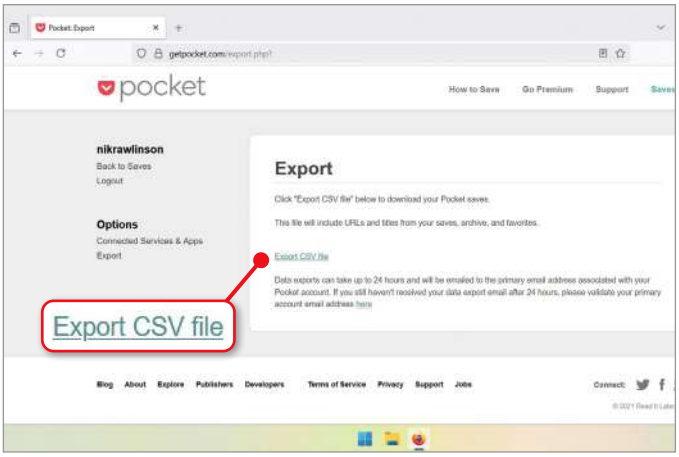
If you have an annual subscription, this will be refunded on a pro-rata basis. You don't need to take any action and the charge will be refunded automatically to your original payment method.

Pocket was removed from Firefox in version 140, which was released in late June, while Mozilla stopped supporting the Pocket browser extension on 22 May. Anyone who tries to download the extension after that date should land on the Pocket export page.

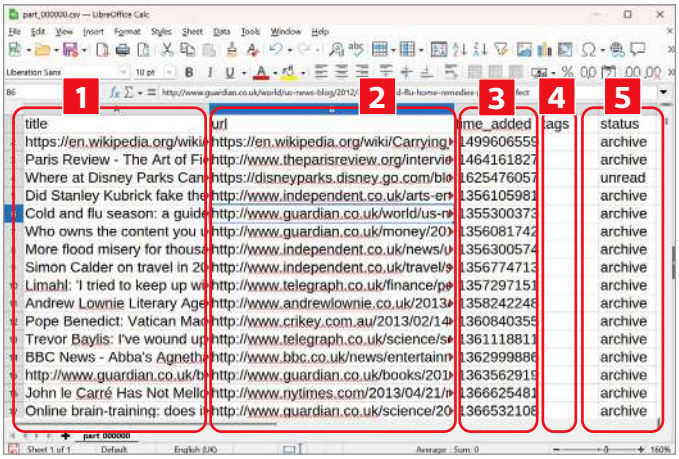
Mozilla is shutting Pocket, giving you until 8 October to export your data

I read Pocket content on a Kobo e-reader (pictured below), which made reading in bed particularly handy as I didn't have to look at a backlit screen before trying to sleep. Eventually, however, my Kobo will lose the ability to sync Pocket content.

Pocket will also disappear from Kobo devices



You can export your Pocket links until 8 October



Opening a .csv file in a spreadsheet arranges the contents into a table

1 Export your Pocket data

If you don't want to transfer your saved articles to another service, you can export them directly so they're saved on your computer. You'll also need to do this if you want to move them to Instapaper (but not if you intend to use Matter). Go to www.getpocket.com/export and log in using your existing Pocket credentials.

Now click 'Export CSV file' link (see screenshot above) and Pocket will compile a list of your saved articles, plus any annotations you've made, and send a link to your registered email address from where you can download it. The export does not contain the actual content of the articles you saved, because the copyright in that content is owned by its original creator or publisher.

Pocket states that it can take up to seven days for the link to arrive, after which it will remain active for 48 hours. In our case, the link actually arrived within an hour of us having requested it (check your spam folder if it hasn't arrived within a day or two).

Click the link to download the saved archive. If you don't click it within 48 hours, don't worry: you can generate a new one by repeating the step above. Before you do, though, check that the address on your Pocket account is correct, as that could explain why it hasn't turned up already. To do this, visit www.getpocket.com/account and scroll down to the Email Addresses section. Click 'Change Email' if necessary.

2 Open your exported data

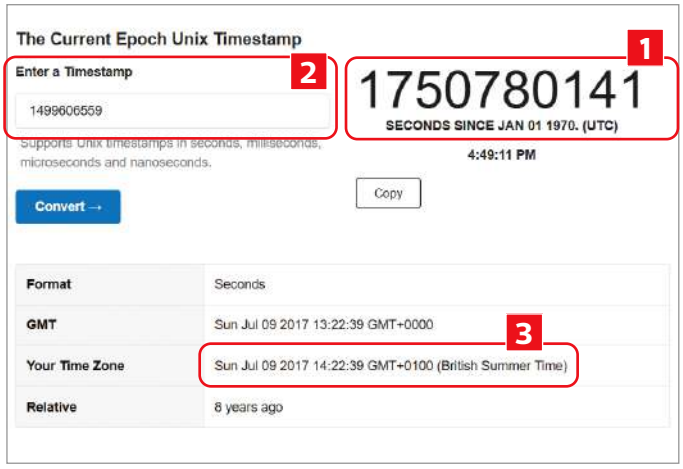
Once you've downloaded the exported file, unzip the 'pocket.zip' file, which you'll find in your Downloads folder. In our case, the archive contained just a single file called 'part_000000.csv', although the fact it's a 'part' suggests that very large libraries may be split into several files to make them more manageable.

The .csv at the end of the file name stands for Comma Separated Values. This is a well-established and widely used file format that you can open with a tool such as Windows Notepad. However, you'll find it far easier to manage if you use a spreadsheet program, like Excel, LibreOffice Calc or Google Sheets, as these will automatically organise the contents in a table.

Specifically, it organises them into columns for article title (1 in our screenshot above), url (web address) 2, the time you saved the link 3, any tags you've applied to the link 4, and its status 5, which in our case was either 'archive' or 'unread' for each article.

You'll notice that the 'time_added' column contains a series of 10-digit numbers – our top one is 1499606559. This is what's known as a Unix timestamp. Unix (and Linux, which is similar) is commonly used by web servers, and it counts up from zero, incrementing the timestamp by one for each second from 1 January 1970.

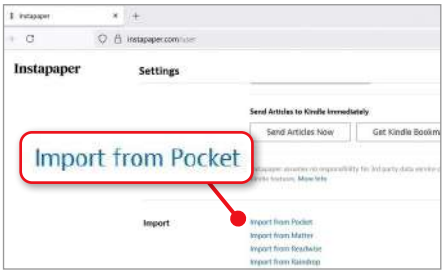
Knowing this, we can work out exactly when an associated link was saved, either by calculating what time is exactly 1499606559 seconds from 1 January 1970, or using an online converter like www.unixtimestamp.com, which not only shows the current Unix timestamp (1 in our screenshot below left) but when we paste a timestamp into the box at the top left of the page 2, informs us that the oldest link in our Pocket archive was saved on Sunday 9 July, 2017 3.



You can paste Unix timestamps to find out how old your Pocket articles are

3 Import your data to Instapaper

Now that you've downloaded the links to your saved articles, you can import them to an alternative service, such as Instapaper. Like Pocket, it has been around for some time, having been established in 2008. If you don't already have an account, visit www.instapaper.com and click 'Create an Account'. All you need is your email address and a password to get started. Click 'Create



You can easily import your Pocket links to Instapaper

Account' once you've entered these.

When you've logged into your Instapaper account, click your email address at the top of the screen, then Settings. Scroll down the settings page until you reach the Import section, then click 'Import from Pocket' (see screenshot above). This opens a File Explorer window. Navigate to the .csv file you extracted from the .zip archive, select it, and click Open. Instapaper will open the list and use it to populate your Instapaper home page, which shows the list of articles you have saved to read later.

In future, adding new links to the list is a simple case of copying the address from the browser and clicking Add Link at the top of the Instapaper homepage. Alternatively, add the Instapaper extension to your browser and you can save whichever page is open in your browser to your Instapaper reading list with a single click. Install the extension by dragging it to your browser's bookmarks toolbar from www.snipca.com/55171.

4 Import your data to Matter

If you have an iPhone, or you're happy to read your saved links exclusively through a browser, we'd also recommend trying Matter. We were originally going to make this our only recommendation, but unfortunately there's no Android app, and you need to use the smartphone app to import your Pocket data.

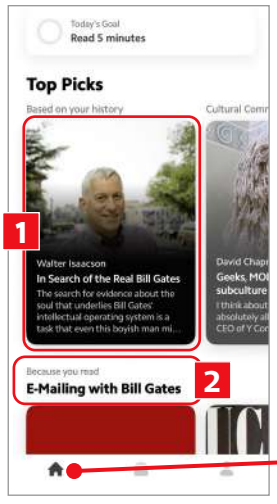
You can find Matter at www.getmatter.com and the iPhone app is at www.snipca.com/55168. To import your Pocket list, install and launch the app and, when asked if you want to import from Pocket, click 'Yes, I'm joining from Pocket'. Select 'Import your list and your archive', then tap Continue and your phone will alert you that Matter wants to use 'getpocket.com' to sign in (1 in our screenshot left). Tap Continue 2.

On the following screen, use your Pocket credentials to log into your Pocket account. Pocket will send an authorisation code to your email address. The Matter app will then start importing your Pocket archive in the background.

Tap through the rest of the sign-up instructions, then create a new account by tapping how you want to sign in. Or, if you've already created a Matter account, enter your email address and click the link it sends to your email inbox to log in.

Matter saves your links in a 'Queue'. This works like Instapaper's home page, but also has its own Home page which, if you click it in the browser sidebar, contains your own saved articles and others from around the web it thinks you might enjoy.

In our experience, the recommendations were influenced by what we'd already saved to our list. It suggested the article 'In Search of the Real Bill Gates' (1 in our screenshot below) because I'd saved 'E-Mailing with Bill Gates' 2. You'll find the list of recommendations in the iPhone app by tapping the house icon at the bottom 3.



Matter can recommend articles based on what you've already saved

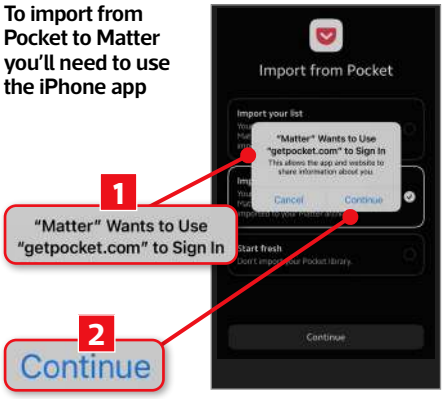
How I save articles for later

I was disappointed when I read that Mozilla was closing Pocket. I've made the move to Matter by following the steps described here. Although I have both an Android phone and iPhone, I currently tend to leave the house only with the iPhone, so will still be able to catch up on my reading during those quiet moments.

Nik Rawlinson

How do you save articles for later? Please let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

To import from Pocket to Matter you'll need to use the iPhone app



Get recommendations in new Ten Tabs email

Although you'll no longer be able to see recommendations in Pocket's app, they'll still be in Mozilla's daily newsletter Ten Tabs (previously called Pocket Hits), sent once every weekday (Monday to Friday). Ten Tabs will have launched by the time you read this – see www.snipca.com/55190 for more details.

Alternatives we like include The Electric Typewriter (www.tetw.org), which divides diverse reading lists into logical categories. Also try Longreads (www.longreads.com), which is owned by Automattic, the company behind blogging platform WordPress and podcast app Pocket Casts. Since 2011, it's published annual best-of lists – read them at www.longreads.com/best-of.

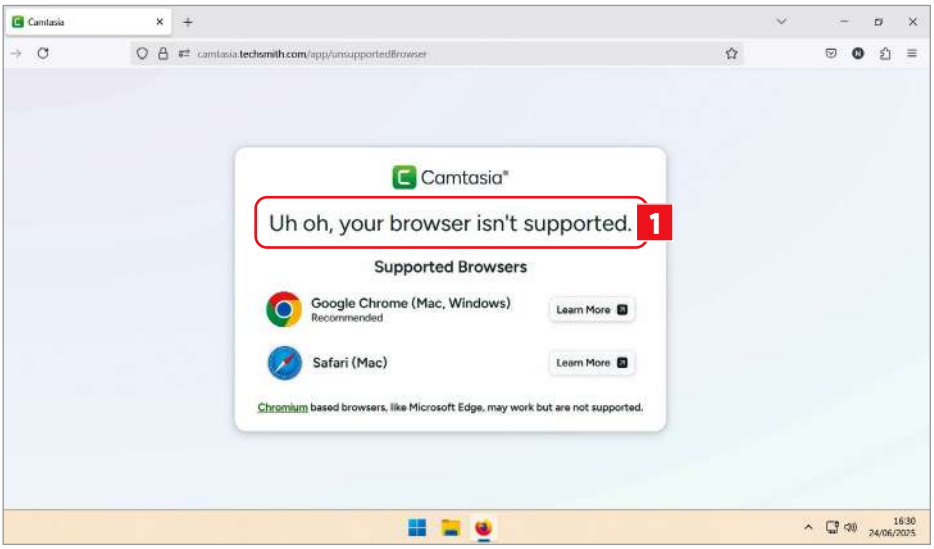
Don't confuse Longreads with Longform (www.longform.org), which as well as being a podcast between 2010 and 2022 (all episodes are archived on the site) features a huge catalogue of non-fiction reads. To date, it has gathered more than 10,000 pieces. And finally, try the award-winning newsletters from *The Week* one of *Computeractive's* sister publications: www.snipca.com/55192.

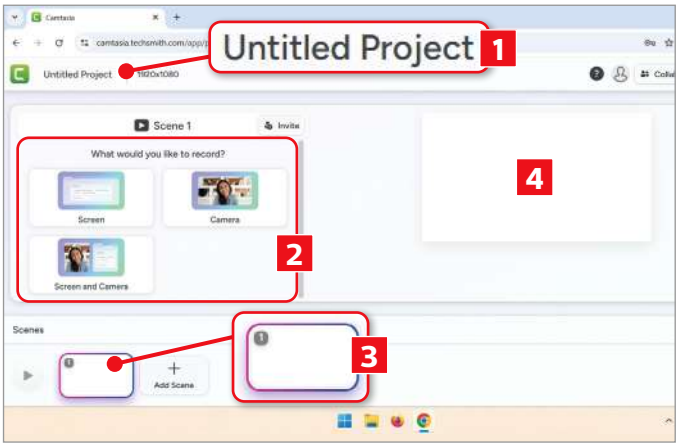
Record your PC screen for free

What you need: Camtasia Online
Time required: One hour

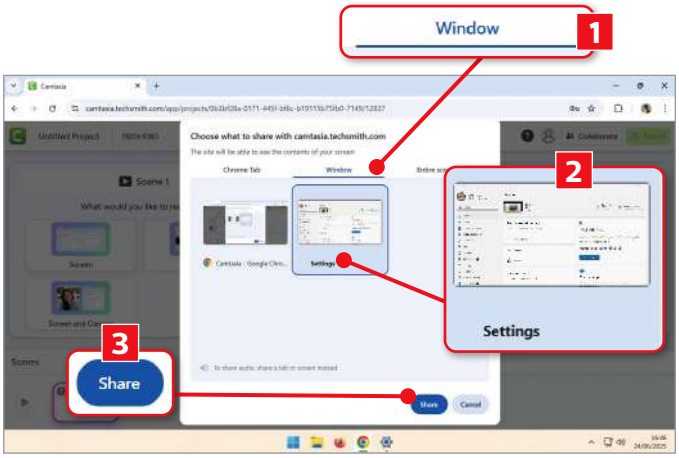
TechSmith's Camtasia has long been one of our favourite tools for screen recording, but with subscriptions starting at £164 per year, it's hardly cost effective if you only need to capture a few minutes of footage to share. TechSmith has now launched a free online version that runs entirely in your browser (except Firefox) – so no software installation is required. As long as you have a TechSmith account, you can record unlimited clips of up to five minutes, completely free. Here, we'll explain how you can use it to record your PC screen.

STEP 1 Visit www.snipca.com/55307 and click Start Recording Now. This will take you to a sign-in page. If you don't already have a TechSmith account, click 'Sign up', enter an email address and click Continue. Work through the remainder of the sign-up steps, which includes clicking a link sent to your inbox to verify your address. The site will now check that your browser is compatible. If it isn't, you'll see a message saying your browser isn't supported 1. Note that the message says Chrome is a supported browser, but Camtasia also works fine in browsers that use its Chromium code, like Brave and Edge.

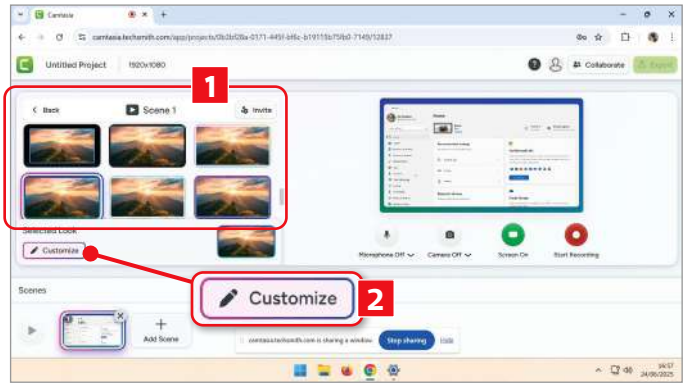


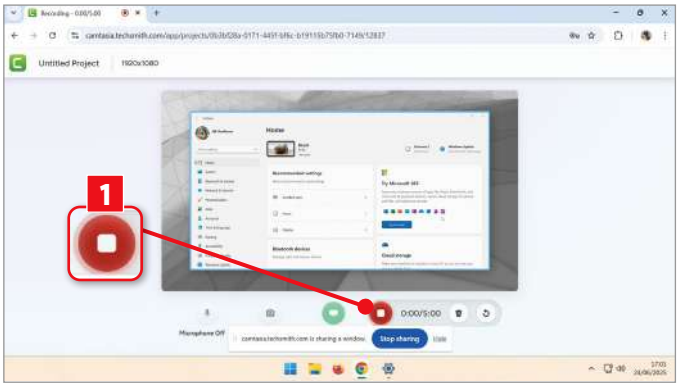


STEP 2 Click Untitled Project 1 and give your new video a name to help you identify it in future. Now decide what you want to record by clicking Screen, Camera or 'Screen and Camera' 2. We're using a desktop PC without a built-in camera, so we'll click Screen. It's a good idea to familiarise yourself with the rest of the interface – the Scenes section 3 shows your video as a film strip containing each scene, and the panel above it 4 is where you can watch a playback of your recording.



STEP 3 If you've chosen to record your screen (or screen and camera), you need to tell Camtasia exactly what it's going to capture by clicking the appropriate option in the box that appears. The options are a Chrome browser tab, a program window or your entire screen. We're going to create a video showing how to uninstall programs, so we've launched Windows' Settings in the background and therefore we click Window 1, then Settings 2, then Share 3.

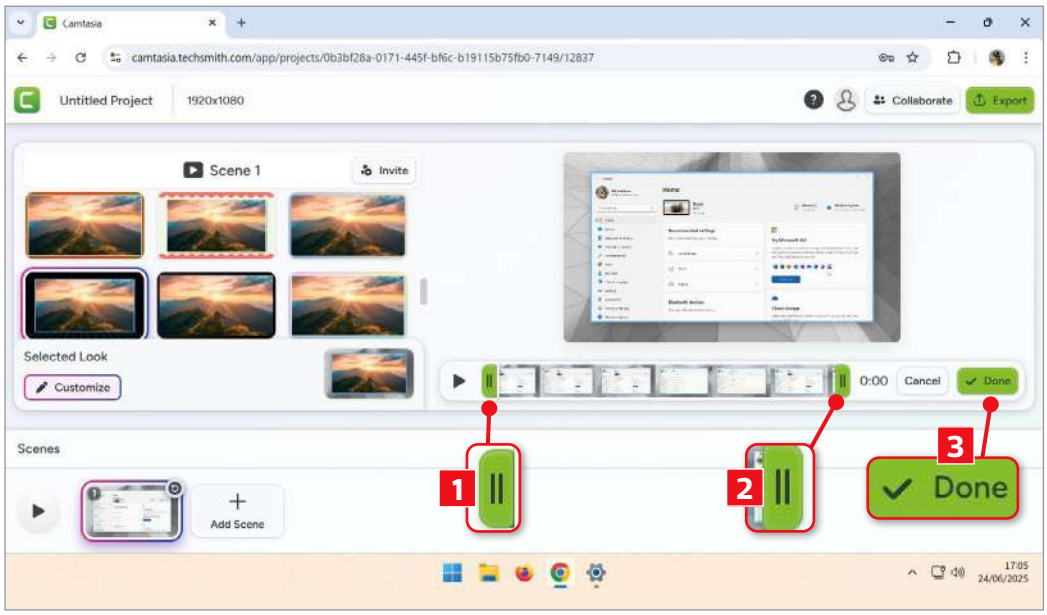


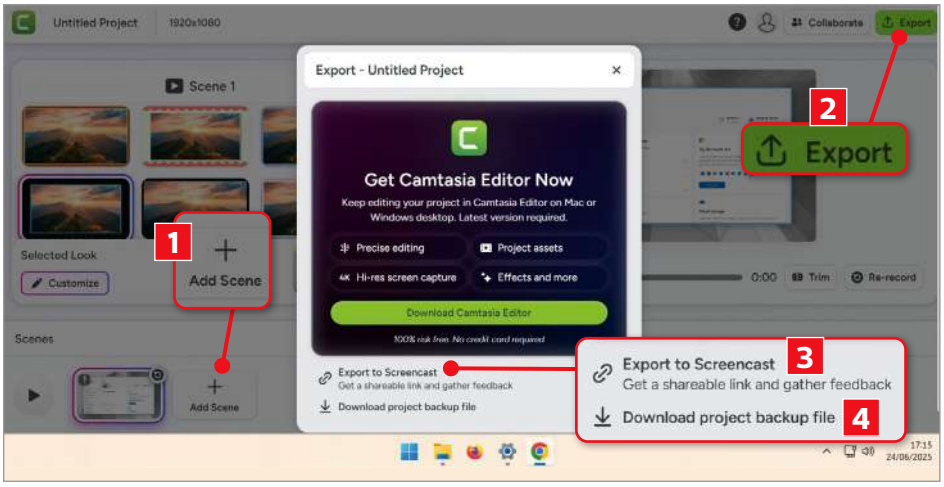


STEP 4 The window you're recording will be set against a background of your choice. Choose the background you want to use from the range of 'Looks' that now appears 1. When you've done that, click Customize 2 to change the colours, add a reflection or drop-shadow, and even apply an animated background if you want. Many of the options are quite eye-catching, but make sure you don't distract attention from your message.

STEP 5 When you're ready, click Start Recording. Camtasia counts down from five, then starts capturing what's happening on screen. Switch to the window/program you selected and perform the tasks you wanted to capture. When you've finished, switch back to the browser and press the stop button 1. This return to your browser may also be captured if you're recording the whole screen, so we'll now explain how to trim unwanted footage.

STEP 6 Click the Trim button below the playback window to display a small film strip of your recording. Drag the green handles at the left and right ends of the strip towards the centre. Dragging the one on the left 1 removes frames from the start of the video, while the one on the right 2 removes frames from the end. When you've isolated the part you want to keep, click Done 3.





STEP 7 If you want to add any further clips to your video, click Add Scene 1 and repeat Step 5. When you've added all of the scenes you need, click Export 2. A download link for the full Camtasia Editor will appear, which has more advanced editing tools, but if you're happy with what you've created, click 'Export to Screencast' 3. This uploads your video to Camtasia's free and private video-hosting service. When it's finished uploading, click the link that's displayed, then click More. Finally, click the option to download a copy of the video to your PC.

Readers' Tips

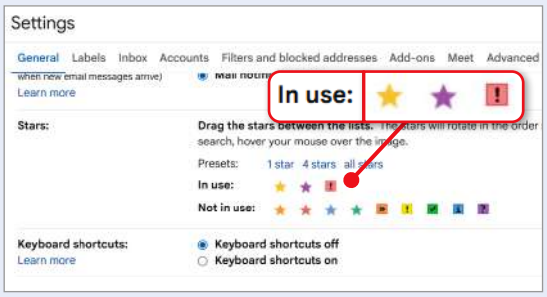
TIP OF THE FORTNIGHT

Choose different star colours for important emails

Over the years, I've got into the habit of 'starring' important emails in Gmail, so they stand out when I have more time to deal with them. I was frustrated that the only colour you can choose for a star is yellow – or so I thought.

Click the top-right Settings cog then 'See all settings' and make sure the General tab is selected. Now scroll down to the Stars section. You'll probably see that the yellow star is the only one 'in use'. Add more colours and symbols by dragging them from the 'Not in use' row – here (see screenshot) I've added a purple star and an exclamation mark – there are also ticks, arrows and question marks. Scroll to the bottom then click Save Changes.

Once done, you just need to keep clicking a star symbol next to an email to see the different options you chose. It's a clever way of ranking the priority of emails. The ones I mark with an exclamation mark are most important.



Nigel Braine

Nigel wins a copy of our 2024 Back Issue CD **Buy it from us at www.snipca.com/53433**

BROWSERS

Press keyboard shortcut to see Chrome's downloads

I've just learnt a keyboard shortcut for Chrome that would have saved me hundreds of clicks over the years if I had discovered it earlier. Pressing Ctrl+J opens the Downloads section of Chrome (see screenshot below), showing what you've downloaded recently. I always thought you had to click the three dots at the top right then click Downloads. I notice too that it works in Brave and Firefox.

Charles Hawkins

SOFTWARE

Add audiobooks to iPod without using iTunes

Your answer to Michael Parker's question in Issue 712 (page 20) about moving music from Windows to an iPhone caught my eye. I actually have an old iPod I still use and wanted to add some more audiobooks, but didn't want to use iTunes. Instead I recently found the free CopyTrans Manager (www.snipca.com/55196, pictured above right), and this has worked perfectly. It's another free solution to go with your suggestion of using iTunes.

George Chappell

OFFICE

Show Word documents as windows with keyboard shortcut

In Issue 712's Make Office Better (page 47) you explained that

Why I stopped using...

Sky Glass TV

I was impressed by Sky Glass at first, when I got the TV set (the 43in model) in 2023. But over the past year the picture kept freezing, especially during live sport. It also made an irritating noise and often wouldn't connect to the web. I'm not the only one – see Sky's customer forums: www.snipca.com/55199.

And what I use instead...

I persisted with Sky Glass until my 24-month contract ended, then took it off the wall and replaced it with another 43in TV – the **Bush 43UT24SB** (pictured). It's your current 'Buy It!' choice (see page 33) and undoubtedly deserves that accolade. Its Full HD screen can't compare with Sky's 4K, but it's never once failed to connect to the internet.

It has Freely, which is surprisingly good. There are some niche channels missing, but it has (for me at least) 99 per cent of what's decent to watch. One of the reasons I tried Sky Glass in the first place was for the improved sound (I'm slightly hard of hearing), but Bush has Dolby Atmos so I hear everything clearly.

Best of all, it cost just £179 from Argos (www.snipca.com/53637). And to think I ended up paying nearly £700 for Sky Glass!

Neal Chandler

Tell us why you stopped using a website, app or program: letters@computeractive.co.uk

pressing Shift+F5 in Microsoft Word takes you back to your last edit. I often use another F5 trick: pressing Alt+F5 turns a full-screen document (ie, it's maximised) into a smaller window. It saves you having to click that icon top right showing one square overlapping another. It works in Excel and PowerPoint too.

Simon Wells

SEARCH

See Reddit posts in DuckDuckGo results

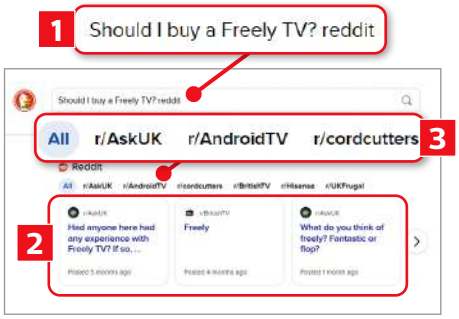
I see you're increasingly mentioning Reddit as a source of information. I must admit I find its forums sprawling and hard to fathom, not like the friendly messageboards that were popular 20 years ago, but now seem to have vanished.

However, I realise that Reddit is a fantastic source of opinion and information, so I've been looking for a way to benefit from it without having to navigate its mazy structure. DuckDuckGo (https://duckduckgo.com), my favourite search engine, came up with the answer a few weeks ago. You just need to type reddit with your search query and you'll be shown a box at the top of your results linking to Reddit posts.

My attached screenshot (below) is a good example. I asked whether I should buy a smart TV and added reddit to the end 1. This gave me several boxes along the top that I could click 2. You can also choose to narrow results to just one Reddit forum by selecting it 3.

By the way, I learned about this from DuckDuckGo's weekly newsletter. Sign up for it at www.snipca.com/55163.

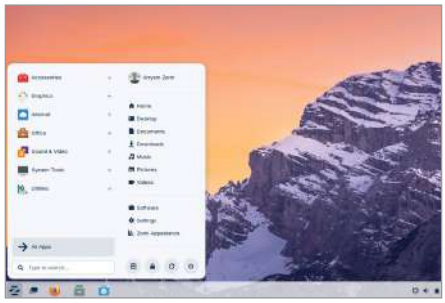
Bob Whittaker



OPERATING SYSTEM

Replace Windows 10 with Linux distro Zorin

I read with interest your article on whether to switch from Windows 10 to Linux (see Issue 711, page 60), but I had already beaten it to the punch by following your earlier advice from a previous article.



I had an HP laptop, around 17 years old, that was running Windows 10 as slowly as a wet fortnight. With the axe soon to fall on Windows 10, I took the plunge and installed the Linux distro Zorin (https://zorin.com, pictured above). Writing the Zorin distro to an 18GB USB drive using balenaEtcher (https://etcher.balena.io) was easy and fast. I set my laptop to boot from the USB drive and it loaded and installed within 10 minutes.

Zorin has been a revelation. It's faster to start and quicker to load web browsers, word processors and so on (it comes bundled with LibreOffice). I've also used Wine (www.winehq.org) to load a couple of apps that I use a lot in Windows and they work just as well. I was even more amazed that my networked HP 3050A printer, which is also old, was detected by Zorin and printed to it without me needing to install any additional drivers. The latest version is 17.3 – see what it looks like at www.snipca.com/55157.

Fraser Drummond

Reader recommends...

AOC Gaming CQ32G4VE PC monitor

£198 from www.snipca.com/54879

I second your recommendation of the AOC Gaming CQ32G4VE monitor, which you suggested to Hefin Davies as the best gaming monitor larger than 27in (Issue 711, page 26). I bought it last year mostly to watch films on, and its 32in QHD screen does this justice.

But its refresh rate of 180Hz has also made a big difference even when just browsing the web (my previous monitor was just 60Hz). When you scroll up and down it's so much smoother. There are ports at the back where I've plugged in the wireless dongles for my keyboard and mouse.

I know you said in Issue 712 (page 62) never to buy new monitors because refurbished models are such bargains, but you can't go wrong with a brand new CQ32G4VE. The link above is for a new model, but when I checked there was a 'Used – Like New' model for £175. Look in the panel on the right of Amazon's page at the URL above.

William Drake

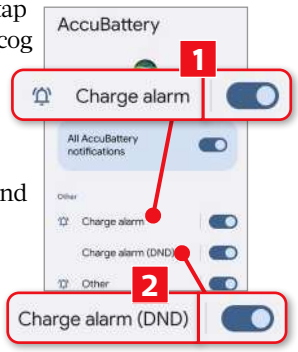
Want to recommend hardware or software to fellow readers?
Email letters@computeractive.co.uk

APPS

Set a percentage alert for phone charging

I've installed AccuBattery (www.snipca.com/54886) since you recommended it in Issue 711's How To ('Charge your phones and laptops efficiently'). It installed smoothly on my Google Pixel 7a. I like the app because it lets you set an alarm when your phone hits a certain charging percentage.

First, tap Charging at the bottom left of AccuBattery then move the blue percentage circle to a charging percentage. I set it to 80 per cent. Now tap the three dots (or cog icon) top right followed by Settings. Scroll down and tap 'Charge alarm sound & vibration' then make sure the 'Charge alarm' slider is on (1 in our screenshot above). There's also a 'Do not disturb' (DND) slider 2 that keeps your alarms 'silent' – though what's the point of that?



Now tap 'Charge alarm' and choose how you want to be alerted: sound, vibration or pop-up message. You can then disconnect your phone to stop it overcharging. If you don't get any alerts you'll probably need to turn on notifications for AccuBattery within Android on your phone.

Roy Edwards

FIREFOX

Preview links before you open them

Firefox has a handy new AI-powered feature called Link Previews, which shows previews of web pages before you open them. These summarise the key points of a page's content, to save you visiting irrelevant sites and opening new tabs unnecessarily.

Link Previews is currently an experiment in Firefox Labs. To activate it, click the browser's three-line menu button and choose Settings, Firefox Labs, then switch on the 'Link previews' option.

To see a preview of a web page, hover your cursor over a link to it and press Shift+Alt. This will open a pop-up box containing an image and summary of the content (see screenshot below). The preview may also contain an estimated reading time for the page, and a link to 'Visit page'.

People also ask
Key points
By popular request, Firefox extension pages now support Full-Page Translations.
The New Tab custom wallpaper option is now available, allowing users to upload their own image as a New Tab wallpaper or choose from a range of colors.
This feature will be rolled out gradually and can be enabled immediately via Firefox Labs.

CHROMIUM

Remove all distractions from YouTube

YouTube's layout is now so cluttered that it's hard to find and watch a video without being distracted by recommendations, Shorts, user comments and live chats. FocusTube (www.snipca.com/55272) offers a simple way to remove distractions from different sections of the site.

Click the extension's toolbar button and select a tab such as Home, Search or Video. FocusTube will display the different elements of those YouTube pages. Click the ones you want to keep – such as the navigation bar and video player – to 'lock' them.

The other elements remain unlocked so that when you click Hide All Unlocked Elements (see screenshot below left), they'll disappear from the page. FocusTube will remember your preferences the next time you visit YouTube.

EDGE

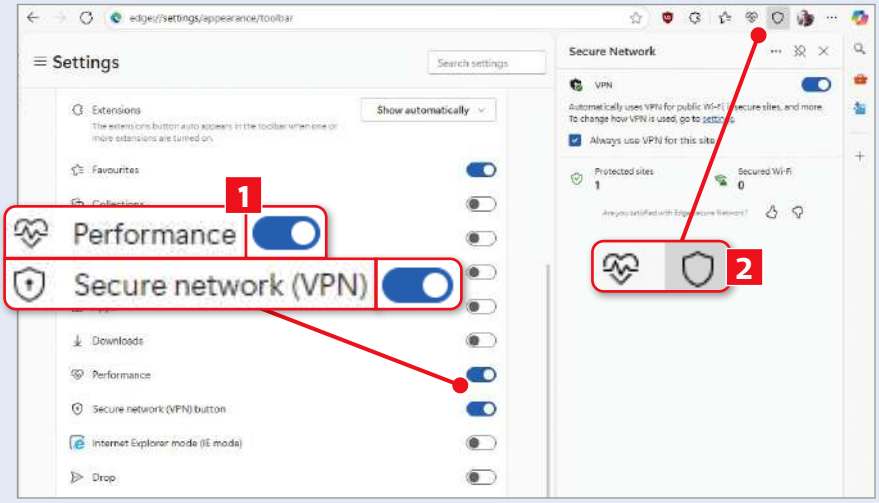
Switch on Edge's performance monitor and VPN

Microsoft has removed the 'Browser essentials' button from Edge's toolbar and split it into two separate features: Performance and Secure Network. The former lets you monitor the browser's memory usage and switch on 'efficiency mode' to conserve your laptop's battery life.

Secure Network lets you switch on Edge's built-in VPN (technically a proxy), to encrypt your data and hide your IP address when you're using public Wi-Fi or accessing potentially unsafe sites. Powered by Cloudflare, Secure Network gives you 5GB of free encrypted data per month.

To reduce clutter on Edge's toolbar, both features are hidden by default but they can be turned on manually. Click the three-dot menu button and choose Settings, then Appearance. Click 'Toolbar' and switch on the options Performance and 'Secure network (VPN) button' (1 in our screenshot).

This will add their buttons to Edge's toolbar 2 so you access them with a single click.



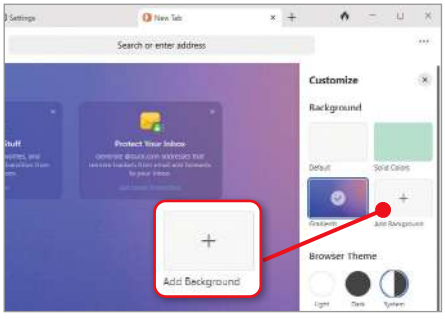
DUCKDUCKGO

Customise your New Tab page

Although DuckDuckGo's browser is purposefully minimalist, it now gives you the option to customise your New Tab page with the background of your choice. This includes using your own photos to make the browser look more personal.

Click the Customize button in the bottom-right corner of a New Tab Page to open a panel of options. Here you can choose between different solid-colour backgrounds and gradient designs.

To use one of your own pictures, click Add Background (see screenshot above) and upload an image from your hard drive. You can also change the browser's theme and choose to show Protection Stats on the New Tab page.

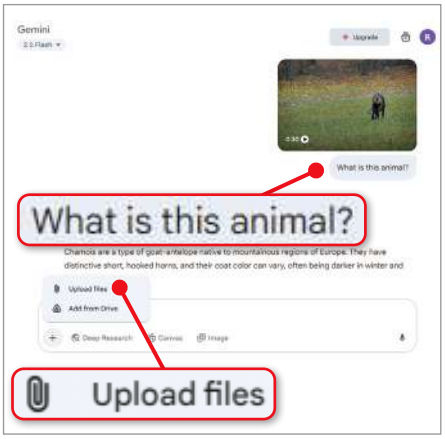


GEMINI

Upload videos for analysis

Google has expanded Gemini's file-analysis capabilities to let you upload videos, as well as images and documents. The new option is available to all users of Gemini's website and mobile apps, using the 2.5 Flash and Pro models.

To upload a video, click or tap the plus-sign button and select 'Upload files' (in Gemini's web version – see screenshot below) or Files (in the app). You can also paste the links of YouTube videos.



Ask a question about the video, then click or tap Send and Gemini will analyse its content and provide an answer. Gemini can process videos of up to 2GB in size and 45 minutes in length with audio, or one hour without. The larger the video, the more tokens required to process it, so be careful not to exceed your daily usage limit.

NOTEBOOKLM

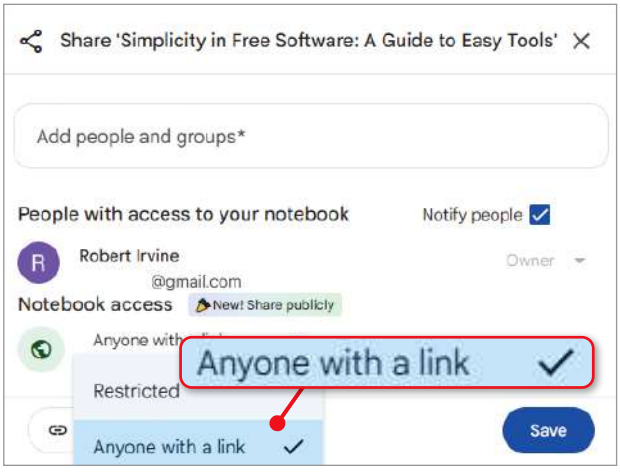
Share your notebooks with anyone

NotebookLM (www.snipca.com/55301), Google's brilliant tool for generating 'notebooks' from multiple sources, has a new sharing option. Previously, you could only share your notebooks with people you granted access to, but now you can share them publicly with any Google user.

Click the Share button in NotebookLM's top-right corner, select 'Anyone with a link' (see screenshot left) under 'Notebook access' and click Save. Click 'Copy link' to share the link to your notebook however you want.

Viewers can't edit the notebook, but they can ask questions about the content and listen to any 'audio overviews' you've created.

The new option is currently only available in personal Google accounts, not Workspace ones.



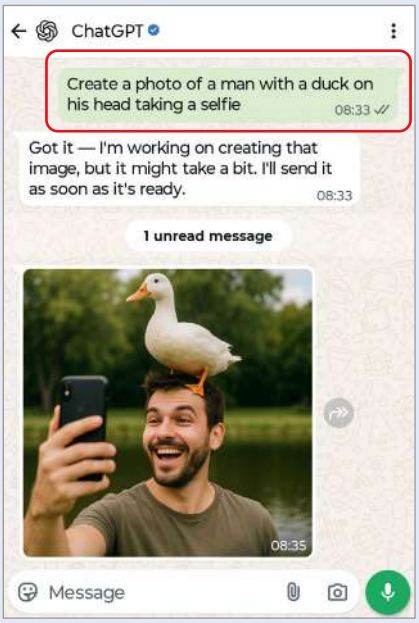
CHATGPT

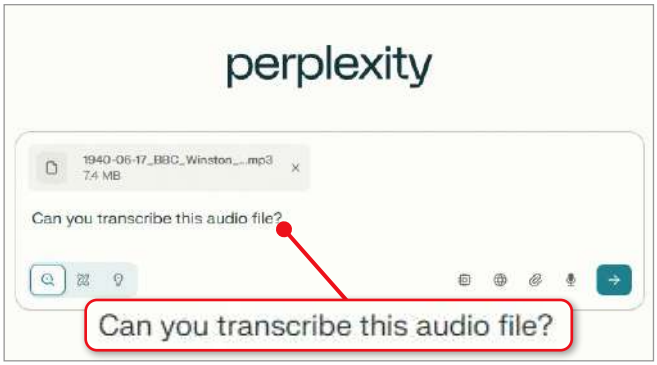
Generate images in WhatsApp

You can now ask ChatGPT to generate images for you in WhatsApp. That may sound odd – why not just use ChatGPT's own app? – but it saves you leaving WhatsApp when you want to create a picture to use in a chat. Also, WhatsApp's own AI assistant, Meta AI, is currently unable to generate images in the app.

To try the feature, you first need to add ChatGPT as a contact in WhatsApp. Tap the plus-sign button and choose 'New contact'. Set 'ChatGPT' as the first name and select United States as the country. Enter the number 1-800-242-8478 and press Save.

Start a WhatsApp conversation with your new ChatGPT contact and describe the image you want to create (see screenshot). ChatGPT initially limits you to generating one picture per day, but this increases to three once you link ChatGPT with your WhatsApp phone number. You'll see a link to do so when you hit your daily limit.


ChatGPT
Create a photo of a man with a duck on his head taking a selfie
08:33
Got it — I'm working on creating that image, but it might take a bit. I'll send it as soon as it's ready.
08:33
1 unread message
08:35
Message



PERPLEXITY

Transcribe your audio and video files into text

Perplexity can save you time and typing effort whenever you need to transcribe the contents of an audio or video file. Click or tap its Attach (paper-clip) icon, choose 'Upload a file' and select a recording.

Ask Perplexity to transcribe the file (see screenshot above) and it will analyse the content and turn speech into text. The AI assistant will tell you if some words were inaudible or unintelligible due to poor sound quality.

Files must be under 40MB in size, and Perplexity's free plan limits you to uploading and transcribing three a day.

Phone and Tablet Tips

ANDROID & iOS

Add songs and collages to your WhatsApp status

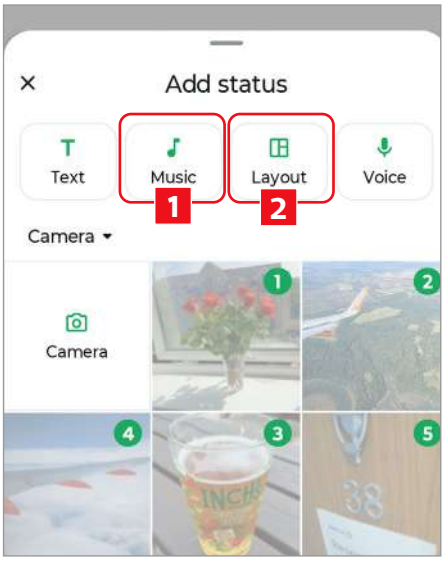
As we reported in Issue 713 (page 7), WhatsApp has started showing ads on its Updates tab. That provides a good reason to avoid the tab, but WhatsApp is hoping to make Updates more appealing with several improvements to its Status feature.

This option, which you access by pressing 'Add status' on the Updates tab, originally let you post text updates that expired after 24 hours. It was then expanded to include images, videos, emojis and voice notes.

The upgraded Status feature lets you include songs in your updates, by tapping the Music button (1 in our screenshot below left) and searching for a track or artist. Press the arrow icon next to a song to add it to your status then write a caption. It's also now possible to use WhatsApp's stickers in your status.

Alternatively, you can express yourself visually rather than musically. A new Layout button 2 lets you create collages of up to six photos to share in your status updates. These can be presented in the order and layout of your choice, and zoomed in or out.

Swipe up to apply filters to the photos, and use the options top right to add text, stickers and music to your collage. Press the Send button when you've finished.

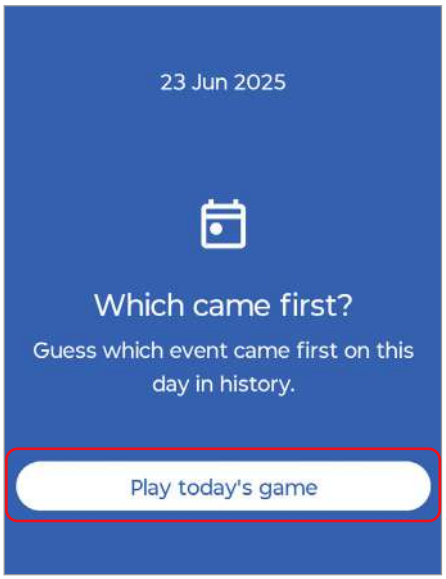


ANDROID & iOS

Play a daily game in the Wikipedia app

Wikipedia has introduced a daily game in its app for Android (www.snipca.com/55286) and iOS (www.snipca.com/55287), to give you something else to play after completing the Wordle puzzle. A new 'Wikipedia games' section has been added to the home page, which suggests there are more to come.

The initial game is called 'Which came first?' and asks you to guess which of two events in history occurred earliest – tap 'Play today's game' (see screenshot above right) to get started. There are five rounds and you score one point for each correct answer. Wikipedia tells you the dates of the events after you submit each answer, and once you've finished the game you can read the full articles.



If you're not interested in Wikipedia games, tap the three-dot icon in the top-right corner of the home-page card and choose 'Hide this card'.

ANDROID & iOS

Travel more sustainably in Google Maps

Google Maps has been updated with several new features that help you travel around Europe in a more environmentally friendly manner. These could prove useful if you're holidaying on the continent this summer, and want to

BEST NEW APPS What you should install this fortnight

Snapseed

Free

iOS www.snipca.com/55289

The iOS version of Google's excellent free image editor has received its first major update for four years. Snapseed's interface has been redesigned, with a new Faves tab for your favourite editing tools, and a Tools tab that gives you easy access to the full range. These include new vintage film effects for your photos.

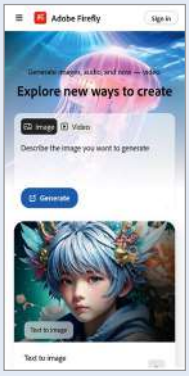
Adobe Firefly

Free*

Android www.snipca.com/55282

iOS www.snipca.com/55283

Adobe's brilliant AI tool for generating images and videos from text prompts now has its own mobile app. This lets you create high-quality content on your phone or tablet, and use Firefly's editing tools to perfect the result. You can generate 10 images and two videos for free, after which you need to subscribe for £4.59 a month.



Organic Maps

Free

Android www.snipca.com/55290

iOS www.snipca.com/55291

Organic Maps has been updated with the useful ability to save your planned routes as 'tracks' you can export to other apps. It has also improved its map data to display the locations of plant nurseries, traffic barriers, cranes and more. The Android app can now show the azimuth angle, so you can navigate to places from true North.

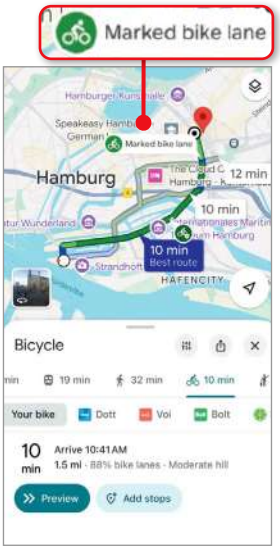
*Contains in-app purchases

reduce the amount of time, money and carbon emissions involved in driving.

When you ask Google Maps for driving directions, it will use AI to predict if walking or taking public transport will get you to your destination in roughly the same time as driving, and show you recommended walking or transit routes. This feature is available in 60 cities, and will soon be expanded to Copenhagen, Stockholm and Warsaw.

Google Maps has also improved its cycling routes for 17 European cities, including Madrid, Rome and Hamburg. These now show cycle lanes on the map (see screenshot below), along with other useful details such as heavy road congestion and steep hills.

When you have no choice but to drive, Google Maps shows the most energy-efficient routes, and alerts you to low-emission and low-traffic zones in cities such as London and Berlin. It is expanding the latter feature to cover more than 1,000 additional zones across Europe, including in Italy, Sweden and Austria.



Google is also helping cities reduce carbon emissions through its Green Light project (www.snipca.com/55288). This uses AI and Google Maps to monitor traffic patterns and optimise traffic lights.

iOS

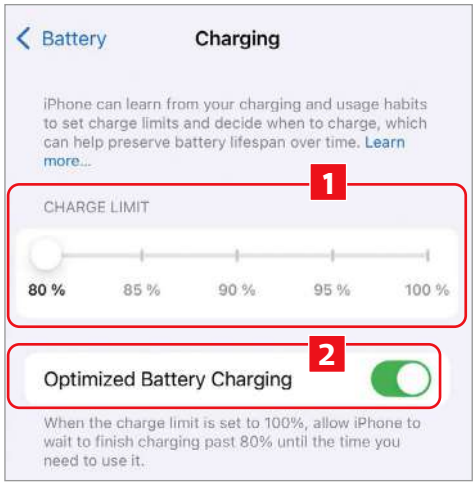
Reduce your iPhone's maximum charge level

One of the most interesting new features in iOS 18.5, released in May, lets you reduce the maximum charge level of your iPhone (it's not available on iPads). By default, your iPhone charges to 100 per cent, but the new option can lower this to 80 per cent.

That may sound foolish, because it means the battery won't last as long between charges, but it will extend the lifespan of your iPhone. Phone batteries have a limited number of charge cycles and charging to 100 per cent every time uses these up more quickly. Additionally, the last 10 to 15 per cent of charging produces more heat and increases voltage stress, which wears down the battery.

To adjust the charge level of your iPhone, open Settings and tap Battery. Select 'Charging' and drag the slider to set the maximum charge limit to between 80 and 100 per cent (1 in our screenshot right).

Alternatively, switch on Optimized Battery Charging 2. This learns your charging habits and delays charging past 80 per cent until shortly before you typically use your iPhone. For example, if you're likely to be at home, it won't need to be fully charged.


Battery
Charging
iPhone can learn from your charging and usage habits to set charge limits and decide when to charge, which can help preserve battery lifespan over time. Learn more...
1
CHARGE LIMIT
80 %
85 %
90 %
95 %
100 %
2
Optimized Battery Charging
When the charge limit is set to 100%, allow iPhone to wait to finish charging past 80% until the time you need to use it.

BEST APPS FOR... Playing music offline

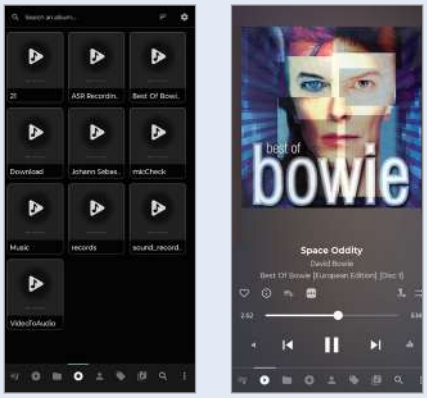
Musicolet

Free

Android www.snipca.com/55294

Musicolet is an ad-free music player that supports all the main audio formats and is packed with useful features. It lets you listen to songs offline, add them to playlists, adjust their playback speed, set one as your ringtone, enhance sound quality with its graphic equaliser and use its 'Audio cutter' to trim the start and end of tracks.

Best For Playing music on Android devices



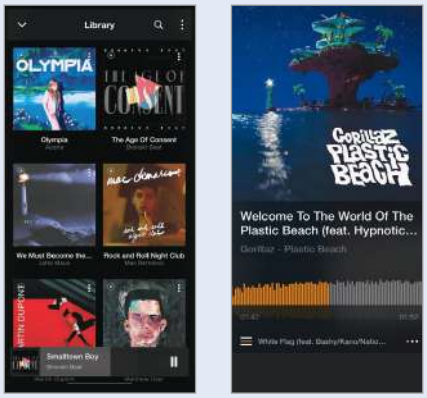
Vox

Free*

iOS www.snipca.com/55296

Vox gives you a sophisticated way to listen to songs from your music collection, offering superb sound quality and support for all popular audio formats, including hi-res lossless ones. As well as playing files offline, Vox can stream music from SoundCloud and online radio stations. Some features require a Premium subscription, which costs £4.99 per month.

Best For Play music on iPhone and iPad



ClassiPod

Free

Android www.snipca.com/55297

ClassiPod replicates the appearance of Apple's iPod Classic to let you enjoy music like you did 20 years ago. It includes the iPod's famous click wheel, Cover Flow layout and simple menu system, and scans your device for audio files you can then organise into playlists. Since we last wrote about the app, several bugs have been fixed.

Best For Retro-style music playback

*Contains in-app purchases

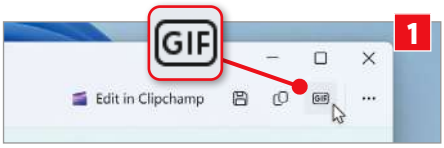
WINDOWS 11 INSIDER

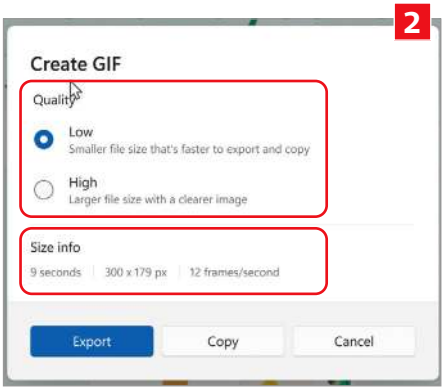
Turn your Snipping Tool videos into GIFs

Microsoft has updated Snipping Tool so it now can turn your videos into GIFs. The feature, available to Windows Insiders on the Dev or Canary Channel, is in version 11.2505.21.0 of Snipping Tool. Check if you have this by clicking the Start button then searching for Snipping Tool, right-clicking the result and selecting 'App settings'. Now look for the number next to Version. If yours is lower than the number above, check Windows Update to see if there's an update waiting to be installed.

If you have the latest version, record a video in Snipping Tool as you normally would. When it's finished, click the GIF button at the top right (see screenshot 1 below) and you'll see options to save your GIF in Low quality (for a smaller file that's faster to export and copy) and High (larger file size with a clearer image) 2. Below you'll see how long your video is, as well as its resolution and how many frames per second.

You can then copy the GIF to share it, or click Export to save it to your hard drive. Exports are limited to 30 seconds. If your video is longer, Snipping Tool will only export the first 30 seconds. Read more about the tool on Microsoft's site: www.snipca.com/55304.





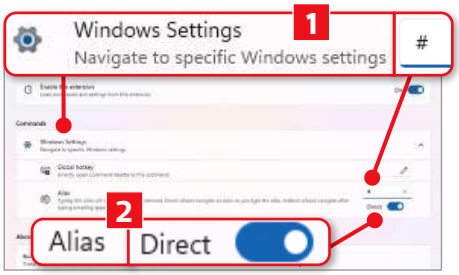
WINDOWS 10 & 11

Change the shortcut for Command Palette extensions

The Command Palette in PowerToys is a fantastically versatile 'do-anything' box you can use instead of the current Windows Start menu, Run commands, File Explorer and other areas of the operating system. It uses extensions that let you find files and folders, open settings and launch programs.

One of its smartest features lets you open extensions by typing a single character. To do this, open PowerToys then click System Tools on the left followed by Command Palette. Now press Windows key+Alt+Space to open the search box. As you scroll down you'll notice the commands you can type to open each extension – they're to the right of each one inside a small grey box. For example, to open the registry you type : (semicolon).

To change these shortcuts click the Extensions tab on the left, then pick an extension. On the next page look for the Alias section (you might need to click the extension's heading to reveal this). In the Alias box type what you want to press to open the extension (we've chosen the hashtag symbol # to open Windows Settings, 1 in our screenshot above right). Finally, click the slider below so it shows



Direct 2. If this slider is greyed out then the extension doesn't currently support aliases.

WINDOWS 10 & 11

Create new alarms and timers without your mouse

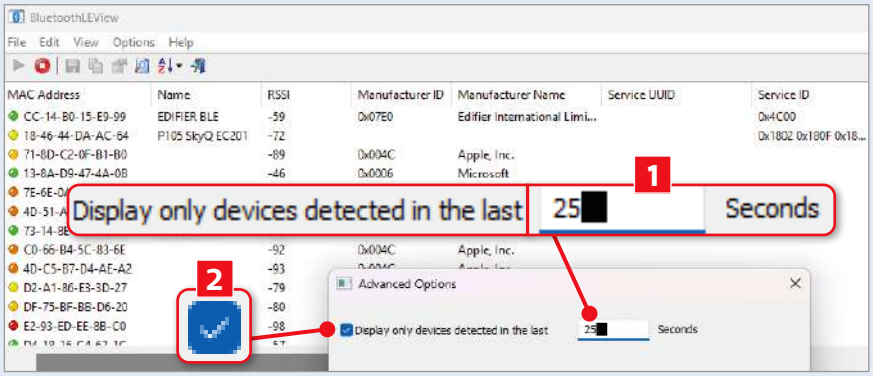
You can set new alarms and timers in the Clock app using just your keyboard. Open the app then use your arrow keys to highlight Timer or Alarm on the left, then press Enter. Now press Ctrl+N to launch a new timer or alarm and use a combination of the arrow keys and Tab key to set the time you want. Press Enter when the Save button is highlighted.

WINDOWS 10 & 11

Show only recently connected Bluetooth devices

By default, NirSoft's Bluetooth Low Energy (BLE) Scanner shows all BLE devices nearby. These are devices designed to send small amounts of data with minimal power, like fitness trackers, wireless headphones, smart-home sensors and some keyboards and mice. NirSoft has updated the tool so it shows only devices connected within the past few seconds. This makes it easier to spot active devices you're currently using, rather than every BLE signal in range.

To get the program, visit www.snipca.com/55300 then scroll down and click the correct Download link for your computer (see page 71 for details on NirSoft's links). Now click Options at the top, then select Advanced Options (or press F9) and choose your time period in the box next to 'Display only devices detected in the last xx seconds' (we've chosen 25 seconds, 1 in our screenshot). Now tick the box 2 and click OK.



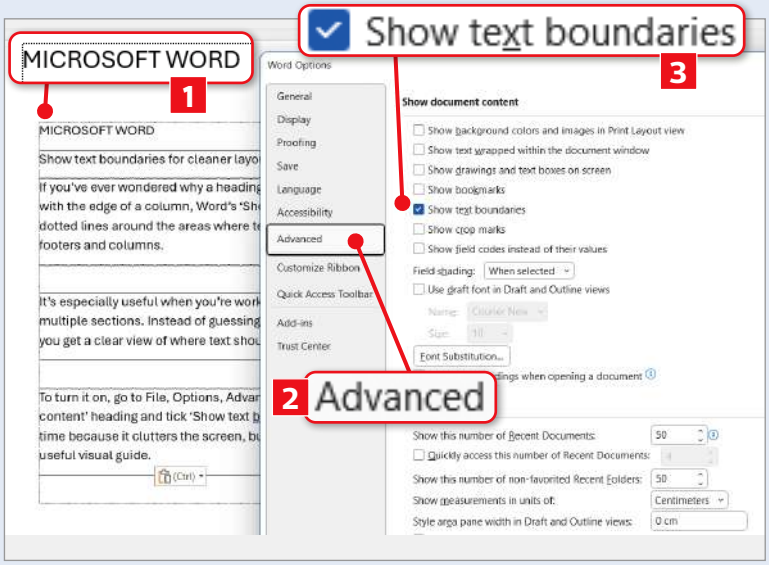
MICROSOFT WORD

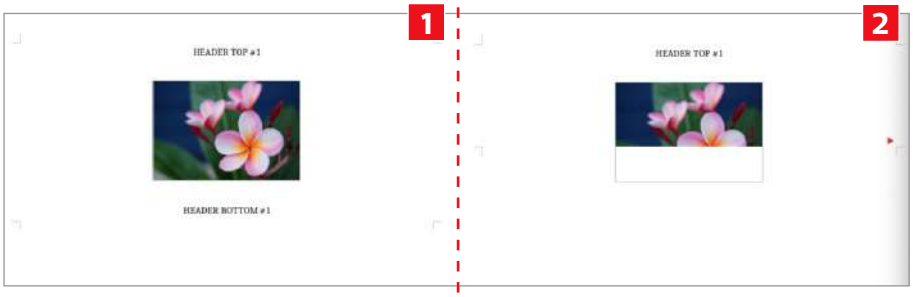
Show text boundaries for cleaner layouts

If you've ever wondered why a heading looks off-centre or why text isn't quite lining up with the edge of a column, Word's 'Show text boundaries' option can help. It adds faint dotted lines around the areas where text can appear (1 in our screenshot), including the main body, headers, footers and columns.

It's especially useful when you're working on forms, newsletters or anything with multiple sections. Instead of guessing where the margins are, or fiddling with spacing, you get a clear view of where text should sit.

To turn it on, go to File, Options, Advanced 2, then scroll down to the 'Show document content' heading and tick 'Show text boundaries' 3. It's not something to leave on all the time because it clutters the screen, but when alignment matters it's a surprisingly useful visual guide.





LIBREOFFICE WRITER

Fix missing first-page headers and footers in Word files

LibreOffice has updated Writer to correctly display first-page headers and footers in Word documents. Previously, these could be invisible or cut off, making pages look messy. The fix is in version 25.2.4, released on 6 June. It changes the way Writer allocates space on the first page, giving headers and footers the room they need to be shown fully.

You can see the difference in our screenshot above. On the left is the original Word document, showing the first-page header 1. On the right is LibreOffice Writer before the fix, where the header is missing or partially hidden 2. After updating, LibreOffice matches Word's layout by expanding the header area so the text is fully visible. LibreOffice should update automatically when you next open it. If not, look for an update notification in the program.

MICROSOFT EXCEL

List your possessions using an inventory template

Microsoft has several free inventory templates for listing your home's possessions, which you can use for insurance claims, moving home or just peace of mind. Find these by searching for 'home inventory' on Microsoft Create (https://create.microsoft.com), which contains templates and design tools for Office software.

Browse for the one you want, making sure it has rows and columns to list your items, including fields for serial numbers, purchase dates, prices and descriptions. When you've found one you like, click it then choose 'Customize in Excel' (if you want to make changes to the design, such as adding or renaming rows/columns) or Download (if you're happy with how it already looks).

We think the best template is the one at www.snipca.com/55293. It's neatly designed and has dropdown arrows (1 in our screenshot below left) for filtering and sorting the columns.

Like most templates the default currency is the US dollar, but you can easily change this. Highlight, then right-click the relevant cells, then click Format Cells followed by Currency 2 then click the £ sign in the Symbol dropdown menu 3.

ONLYOFFICE

Open CSV files without having to choose separators manually

CSV files are plain-text spreadsheets where each value is separated by a character, usually a comma but sometimes a semicolon or tab. This separator tells the program where one column ends and the next begins.

Version 8.3 of OnlyOffice, released in February, automatically detects which separator your CSV file uses when you open it. It means your data should load correctly into columns every time, whether commas, semicolons or tabs separate your values. Previously, you had to select the separator and if you got it wrong, your data would end up jumbled together in a single column.

In The Club

Run a club or society? Here's how your tech can make it easier

Manage membership fees with Excel's Name Manager

Spreadsheets are brilliant for anything involving numbers, especially keeping track of your club's membership fees. With a few formulas, you can automate fiddly calculations and generate up-to-date summaries of how many people haven't paid, how much is owed, and so on.

The trouble is that even the simplest spreadsheet can quickly get messy, particularly when you're juggling lots of details at the same time. And as your spreadsheet grows, so does the chance of making mistakes. That's where Excel's Name Manager comes in.

By letting you give meaningful names to cells or ranges – like 'Members' or 'PaymentStatus' instead of plain references like 'B2:B21' – Name Manager makes your spreadsheets easier to read and update, and less prone to errors.

Here, we'll show you how to use Name Manager to track your club members' payments. We're using the online version of Excel, but the steps are the same in the desktop tool. If you use LibreOffice, its Named Ranges feature works much the same way – click Sheet, 'Named Ranges and Expressions', then Define.

Track paid and unpaid fees

Imagine a simple three-column spreadsheet tracking your club members' fees. The first column (A2 to A21) lists 20 members' names. The second (B2 to B21) shows fees owed – say £20 for full price or £10 for concessions. Make sure these cells are formatted as currency (select them all, right-click, then choose Format Cells followed by Currency). The third column (C2 to C21) shows payment status – either PAID or UNPAID.

To name the cells in your members' names column, select A2 to A21, then click in the Name Box and type Members (1 in our screenshot above right) and press Enter. Now select B2 to B21 and use the same method to name that range FeesOwed 2. Finally, select C2 to C21 and name it PaymentStatus 3. Remember you can't use spaces in your names.

Click in the Name Box to name your columns

Now you've named your data, you can use those names in formulas to create reports that automatically update, and track different parts of your spreadsheet.

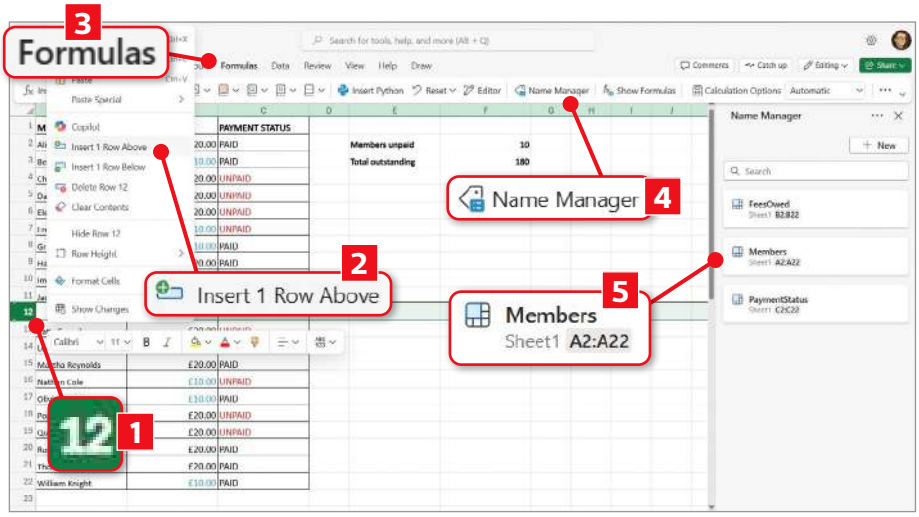
For example, to keep a running count of how many members haven't paid, click cell E2 and type Members unpaid. Next, click F2 then type =COUNTIF(PaymentStatus,"UNPAID") and press Enter.

To track how much money is still outstanding, click cell E3 and type Total outstanding. Now click F3 and type =SUMIFS(FeesOwed, PaymentStatus, "UNPAID") and press Enter.

Add and delete rows as membership changes

As your club gains or loses members, you'll need to add or delete rows to your spreadsheet. The easiest way to add a new member is to right-click an existing row somewhere in the middle (say, row 12, 1 in our screenshot below) and select 'Insert 1 Row Above' 2. This lets you enter your new member's name, fees and payment status. Your named data ranges will be expanded automatically to include the new row.

You can check this by clicking the Formulas tab 3, then Name Manager 4. You should see the data range for your members' names has changed from A2:A21 to A2:A22 5. Alternatively, you can manually edit the cell references for each of your named ranges within Name Manager to include new rows as needed.



Insert or delete rows to add or remove members from your spreadsheet

Next issue: Set up WhatsApp voice chats

What's All the Fuss About...

PNG

It's taken 22 years, but JPEG's biggest rival has finally been updated

What is it?

Standing for Portable Network Graphics, it's a popular image format that uses lossless compression. This makes it ideal for sharp, clean images with transparent backgrounds, such as logos, icons, screenshots and illustrations.

Remind me – what does lossless mean?

It's a method of shrinking files without losing any data. Every pixel stays exactly the same, so image quality never deteriorates no matter how often you open and edit the file. This is its main advantage over JPEG.

Because JPEG isn't lossless?

Correct – it's lossy. It shrinks files smaller than PNG, which sacrifices some image quality but means they don't take up as much space. The latest version, called JPEG XL, is both lossy *and* lossless (see Issue 707, page 49), but it's not widely used – and it might never catch on, now that PNG has been updated after a mere 22-year wait.

Why did it take so long?

Because organisations that approve new file standards are the world's slowest committees. Just look at who's in the body responsible for PNG, the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C): Adobe, Apple, BBC, Google, Microsoft, Mozilla, Netflix, Nokia, Samsung – plus US broadcaster Comcast and telecoms giant Verizon. Some of those are bitter rivals. Getting them to agree on a choice of biscuits at a meeting would be difficult enough, let alone how to update an image format so it doesn't corrupt files used by millions of people.

And will it be worth the wait?

Yes, especially if you use subtitles when watching videos. PNG files have long been used to show subtitles because they're transparent and sharp, making it easy to read the words. But until this update they couldn't handle the brighter colours and contrast of HDR video.

> Photos, logos, icons and other graphics will show greater colour depth and contrast

What's HDR again?

High Dynamic Range – a standard for making images and videos look more lifelike by increasing the contrast between the darkest shadows and the brightest highlights. This means colours pop more, and you can see details in both very dark and very bright parts of the picture – closer to what your eyes see in the real world. So when subtitles now appear on HDR, they'll take advantage of this image quality and look sharper than ever.

But what if you don't use subtitles?

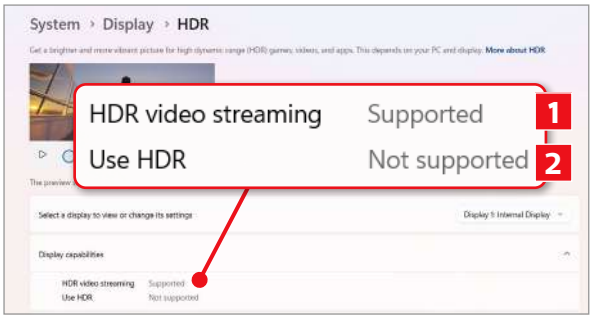
Then you'll still benefit because this update improves *all* PNG images, not just subtitles. Photos, logos, icons and other graphics will show greater colour depth and contrast on HDR screens.

Ah – so I need an HDR screen?

Yes, but many mid- to high-range TVs and monitors have supported HDR for the past eight years or so. On your TV, open settings then look for a section called Picture, Display or Video and see whether it mentions HDR. On your computer, press Windows key+I to open Settings, then click System, Display, HDR. If 'HDR video streaming' is supported (1 in our screenshot below left), you can watch HDR content on sites like Netflix and YouTube. But to see HDR in games, software and across Windows your monitor will need to also support 'Use HDR'. If it's turned off as here 2, you'll only get half the full HDR experience.

Will the update affect my existing PNG files?

No. The update is backwards compatible, which means your PNG files will still open as before. However, they won't benefit from the improved brightness, colour depth or contrast that the new format brings for HDR displays. To see these, you'll need to save or export images using software that supports the updated PNG format.



If your settings are like this, you'll enjoy half the HDR experience

Any examples?

Yes, it's starting to appear in browsers like Chrome, Edge and Firefox, as well as image editors such as Adobe Photoshop and Affinity Photo. Keep an eye out for software updates that mention these enhancements to ensure you're using compatible programs. And make a note in your 2047 diary to check for PNG's next leap forward.

Ditch Google for Proton

Google tools may be free and easy to use, but they also compromise your privacy. Robert Irvine explains why you should switch to Proton's safer and better alternatives

Despite fierce competition from Amazon, Meta and TikTok, Google remains the most notorious tech company for invading its users' privacy. It tracks you around the web, across your devices and even in the real world, collecting your data so its 'partners' can target you with personalised ads.

In previous cover features, we've recommended ditching Google Search for more private search engines such as DuckDuckGo, and Chrome for a a less intrusive browser like Brave (or DuckDuckGo again). But what about other Google tools such as Gmail, Google Drive and Google Password Manager?

These store sensitive data including your emails, personal files and passwords, but Google infamously doesn't protect that data using end-to-end encryption. Although there are alternative tools that do, they can be tricky to master and you'll need to switch between multiple services.

Proton (www.snipca.com/55318) provides a solution to this privacy problem. It offers equivalents to many Google tools, which don't collect, share or analyse your data, and which store it securely so only you can access it.

Proton's services and software are as simple to use as Google's, and are integrated in a similarly convenient way. Here, we explain why you can trust Proton with your private data and show you how to use all its brilliant free tools on your PC, phone and tablet.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Transfer Gmail messages to a secure alternative
- Block tracking pixels and links in emails you receive
- Check the security of all your account passwords
- Protect your files and photos with end-to-end encryption
- Share documents securely using time-limited links
- Connect to free VPN servers with no data limit

YOUR PROTON QUESTIONS ANSWERED

What is Proton?

Proton (www.snipca.com/55318) is a Swiss technology company, based in Geneva, that specialises in privacy-focused software and services. It was founded in 2014 by a team of scientists who met at CERN (the European Organisation for Nuclear Research) and "decided to build a better internet where privacy is the default" (www.snipca.com/55312).

The company launched its first tool, Proton Mail, through a crowdfunding campaign with the goal of creating the world's most secure email service. Proton is now funded by grants and paid subscriptions, and last year set up a non-profit organisation called the Proton Foundation, which is now its controlling shareholder (www.snipca.com/55313).

How is Proton more private than Google?

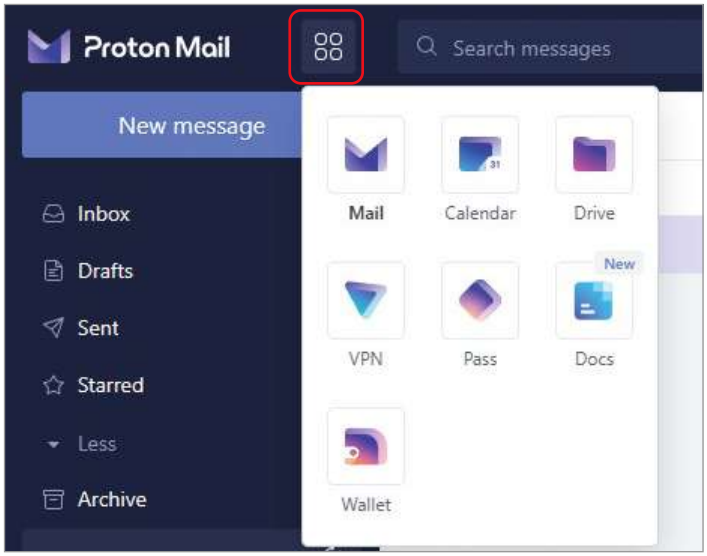
As a Swiss company, Proton is protected by the country's privacy laws, which are among the strictest in the world. Switzerland's neutrality means it's not subject to intelligence-sharing agreements, such as those of the Five Eyes, Nine Eyes and Fourteen Eyes alliances (see www.snipca.com/55314 for an explanation), and Swiss companies are prohibited from passing data to foreign law-enforcement agencies.

Proton further prevents surveillance by providing end-to-end encryption for all its tools (see screenshot below), so your privacy is "mathematically guaranteed". Unlike in the US, UK and EU, the Swiss government has not introduced or considered any legislation to limit users' right to encryption.

The company says it doesn't possess the keys required to decrypt users' data: "As a result, even if Proton were forced to turn over all our computer systems, your data would continue to be encrypted" (www.snipca.com/55315). What's more, unlike Google, all Proton tools are free of ads and don't collect or share your data for advertising or any other purpose.

Protect your privacy with end-to-end encryption
End-to-end encryption is at the heart of Proton's promise to protect your privacy. We use end-to-end encryption to ensure that your privacy is mathematically guaranteed when you use our apps.
Get a Proton account

All Proton tools guarantee your privacy using end-to-end encryption



Switch between Proton tools by clicking the 'Proton applications' button in the top-left corner

Where does Proton store users' data?

Proton initially stored its users' data in a former military bunker, built into a Swiss mountain under 1,000 metres of granite. When Proton Mail and the company's other tools became popular, it moved to a larger data centre in Zurich and additional centres in Germany and Norway.

These data centres outside Switzerland allow Proton to provide a faster and more reliable service. All user data is still protected by Swiss privacy laws, and Proton says its zero-access encryption ensures your data remains private no matter where its servers are located.

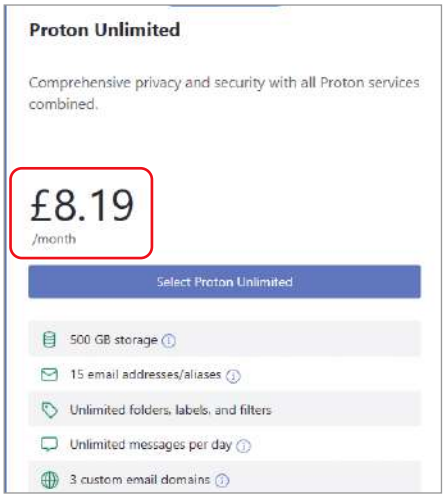
What tools does Proton offer?

As well as Proton Mail, the company offers an online storage service (which includes a document editor), password manager, VPN, calendar and digital wallet. We'll explain how to use all these tools in this feature, and reveal what makes them better than Google's equivalents (where applicable).

Once you've registered for a Proton account, you can switch easily between Proton's online services by clicking the 'Proton applications' button in the top-left corner (see screenshot above). All its tools now have Android and iOS apps, too, so you can use them on your phone and tablet as well as on your computer.

Are Proton's tools free to use?

Yes, all Proton tools are free to use, but they also have paid-for Plus plans. These include extra 'premium' features, a lot more storage and greater flexibility, such as letting you choose which VPN server to connect to. We focus on the free versions in this feature, but we'll also explain the benefits of upgrading.



Proton Unlimited offers all its premium features for £8.19 a month

You can save money by subscribing to Proton Unlimited, which combines all the Plus plans and gives you 500GB of storage. It costs £10.59 per month, discounted to £8.19 if you pay for a year's subscription (see screenshot above) or £6.59 for two years.

How popular is Proton?

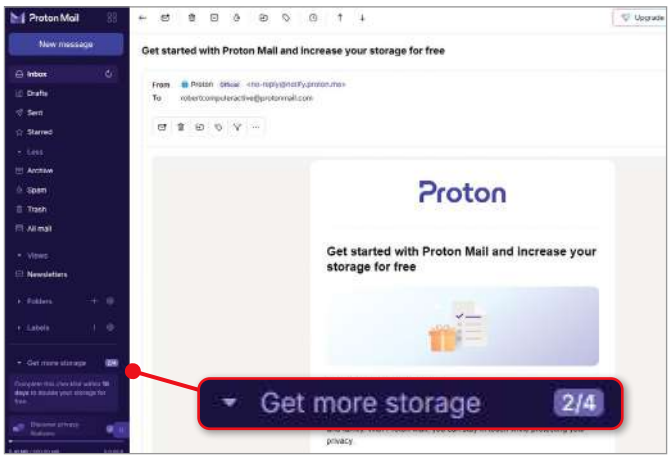
Proton says more than 100 million people and businesses have signed up for an account. Its popularity may pale in comparison to Google's billions of users but, unlike Google, Proton's end-to-end encryption ensures everyone who uses its tools can do so privately and securely.

DITCH GMAIL FOR PROTON MAIL

You need a Proton Mail account to use the company's other software and services, in the same way a Gmail account is necessary to access most of Google tools. The free version of Proton's secure email service gives you 500MB of storage and one private email address, with end-to-end encryption enabled by default. You can use Proton Mail on as many devices as you want.

Visit www.snipca.com/55319, click 'Create a free account' and select the Free plan. Enter a username and password, and choose between an '@proton.me' or '@protonmail.com' email address. Click 'Start using Proton Mail now' – choose 'No thanks' to decline the upgrade to the Plus version – and complete the Captcha.

Select a display name for your Proton Mail account, and optionally set up a recovery method in case you get locked out. You'll now be taken to your new Inbox. Here's what to do next.


Proton Mail
Get started with Proton Mail and increase your storage for free
Proton
Get started with Proton Mail and increase your storage for free
Get more storage
2/4

Increase your storage to 1GB by completing Proton's checklist of actions

Import your emails from other services

Proton Mail lets you import emails from Gmail, Outlook and Yahoo Mail, so you can store and read messages in a private, ad-free environment. However, because the free plan includes just 500MB of storage, you may not have enough space for all your emails – see the next tip to find out how to double your storage.

To import emails and contacts from Gmail, click the Settings cog in the top-right corner and choose 'All settings' to display a list of settings in the left-hand sidebar. Select 'Import via Easy Switch' (1 in our screenshot below) followed by 'Import from Google' 2, and tick Emails and Contacts. Click 'Start Import' and give Proton Mail access to your Google account.

Proton Mail will tell you which email data it's going to import. Click 'Customize' to exclude specific folders or include only messages from within a certain date range. It will import the most recent emails first, and stop when it hits the 500MB limit (you can delete unwanted messages to reclaim space). Click 'Start Import' again to import your data.

Alternatively, rather than filling up your Inbox with old messages, you can forward new messages from Gmail to Proton Mail. This will also remove trackers (see 'Block hidden trackers' tip) and encrypt their content. On the 'Import via Easy Switch' page, click 'Set up auto-forwarding from Gmail' 3 then 'Sign in with Google'. Select your Gmail account and grant Proton access to auto-forward emails.

Double your email storage

To make room for more messages, you can double your 500MB of Proton Mail storage to 1GB for free – but you need to act fast. Complete a checklist of actions within 15 days of opening your account (confusingly, Proton also says 18 days) and you'll unlock that extra 500MB.

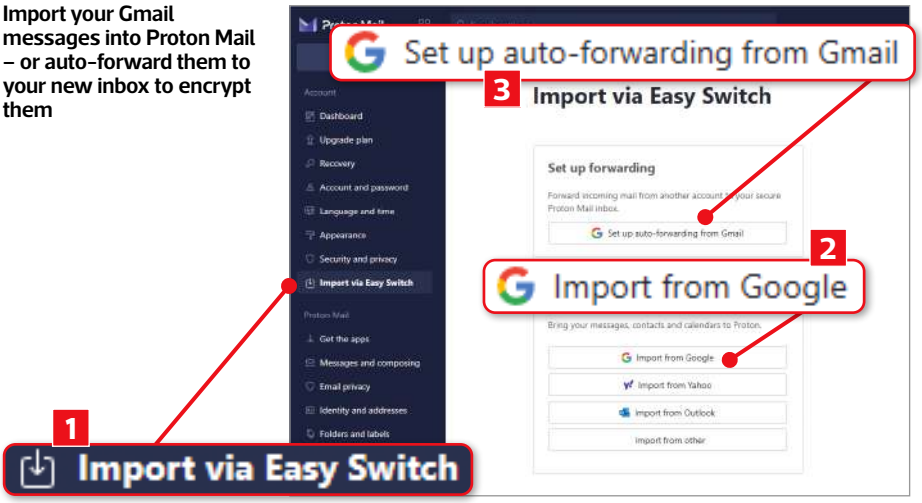
You'll find this checklist under 'Get more storage' in the bottom-left corner of your Inbox (see screenshot in previous tip). The actions include learning about Proton Mail's privacy features, auto-forwarding Gmail messages (see above), updating your website logins to use your new email address and installing Proton Mail's mobile app.

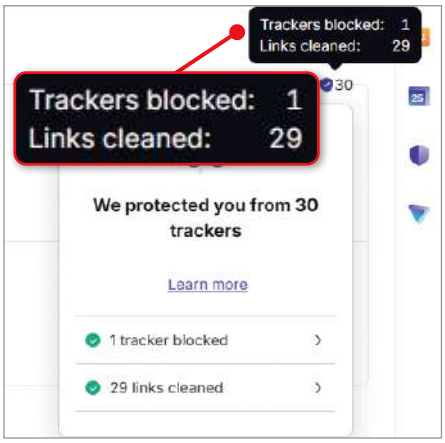
Once you've completed these tasks, Proton will increase your storage limit to 1GB. You can get 15GB by upgrading to Proton Mail Plus (see the box on the opposite page) or 500GB (across all Proton tools) by subscribing to Proton Unlimited (see previous page).

Block hidden trackers and spam

Proton Mail automatically blocks hidden pixels in emails that let senders spy on you to see when and where you open

Import your Gmail messages into Proton Mail – or auto-forward them to your new inbox to encrypt them





Proton Mail automatically blocks hidden trackers in emails

their messages. Senders can use these pixels to collect data for personalised advertising, so it's no surprise that Gmail allows them. Proton also removes tracking elements from URLs in emails. This prevents senders from seeing how you interact with their websites when you click those links.

When you receive an email containing tracking pixels or links, a shield icon appears in its top-right corner. Click this to see how many trackers Proton has blocked and the number of links it has cleaned (see screenshot below left).

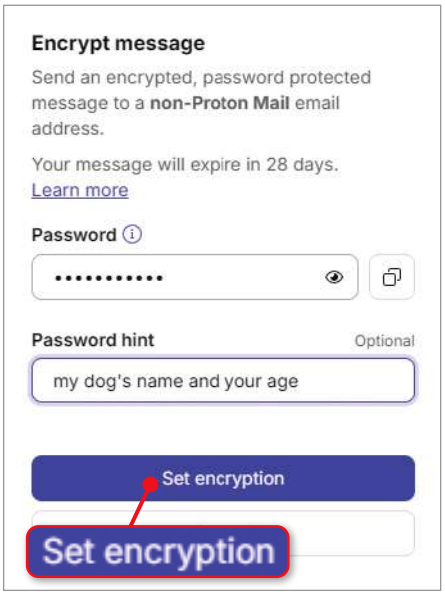
To block an unwanted sender in Proton Mail, such as a spammer or scammer, simply right-click a message from them and choose 'Block sender'. This will reject all their future messages.

Password-protect your emails

All emails you send to and receive from other Proton users are protected by end-to-end encryption. But messages to people who don't use Proton Mail are secured using TLS encryption. This encrypts the connection between the sender and recipient, but not the actual messages, which means they're only protected in transit.

To communicate more securely with people who are not using Proton Mail, you can encrypt your emails using a password. Click the padlock icon in the bottom-left corner of a new message window. Type the password you want to use – either share this separately with the recipient or provide a hint to help them guess it – and click 'Set encryption' (see screenshot below).

Your encrypted email will expire in 28 days, after which it is deleted from your Sent folder and the recipient's Inbox, whether they've read it or not. To change the expiry time, click the Edit button, specify the number of days and hours you want, and tick 'I'm sending this message to a non-Proton Mail user'. Click 'Set' to confirm.



Encrypt your emails to non-Proton Mail users using a password

The recipient will receive a message explaining they have an encrypted email from your Proton Mail address, which includes a button to 'Unlock message'. Clicking this will prompt them to enter your password so they can read the content.

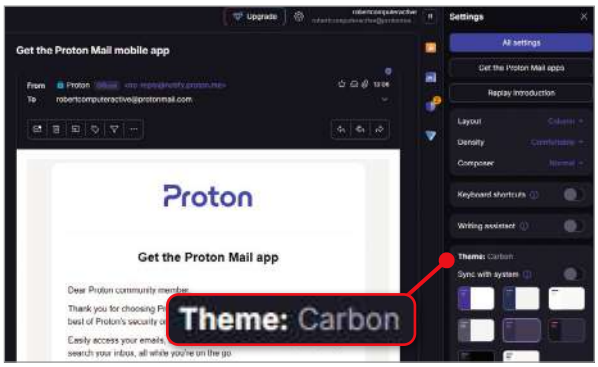
Download Proton Mail's apps

Proton Mail's free apps for Android (www.snipca.com/55324) and iOS (www.snipca.com/55325) encrypt the emails you store on your phone or tablet – and those you send to or receive from other Proton users. Both apps offer most of the same features as the web version, though only the iOS app blocks hidden trackers in messages.

You can set Proton Mail as the default email app on your Android or iOS device. On an Android phone, open Settings and choose Apps then 'Default apps'. Tap 'Email app' or 'Mail app' and select Proton Mail. If you don't see that option, long-press the Gmail icon on your home screen and tap the 'i' icon. Choose 'Open by default' then press 'Clear default preferences'. The next time you tap an email link, select Proton Mail and choose Always to set it as the default mail app.

To do the same on an iPhone or iPad, open Settings and tap Apps then Default Apps. Press 'Email' and choose Proton Mail.

Proton Mail also has a Windows app (www.snipca.com/55326) that you can use as your desktop email client. This is available only with its paid-for plans, but you can try it for free for 14 days.



You can customise Proton Mail's appearance with different themes

Customise Proton Mail's interface

Proton Mail offers several ways to customise its interface. Click the Settings button in the top-right corner to open its panel of options. For example, you can switch from the default Row layout to Column, which displays the content of emails to the right of the message list. The Density option lets you choose a more compact layout, and there are eight different themes, which transform Proton Mail's appearance (see screenshot above).

Last year, Proton Mail introduced a private AI-powered writing assistant called Proton Scribe (www.snipca.com/55328), which drafts emails on the subject and in the style of your choice. However, this is currently limited to Proton Duo subscribers (see page 56) so ignore the option to enable the writing assistant.

What else do you get in Proton Mail Plus?

Proton Mail Plus costs £39.48 a year – which works out at £3.29 per month – or £4.09 for one month if you pay monthly. At the time of writing, you could try it for 99p for the first month when upgrading through the mobile app.

As well as the features we've mentioned, Proton Mail Plus lets you add up to 10 email addresses. These are technically 'aliases' rather than additional accounts, and allow you to send and receive messages without revealing your real Proton Mail address. If you own a domain name, you can use that in your custom email address.

The free plan lets you create only three folders and labels, and one custom filter, to organise your emails, while the paid-for version is unlimited. Paying customers can also set up automatic replies and send more than 150 messages per day.

Frustratingly, whatever plan you have, Proton Mail limits attachment sizes to 25MB. To share larger files, you'll need to use Proton Drive (see page 55).

MOVE YOUR PASSWORDS TO PROTON PASS

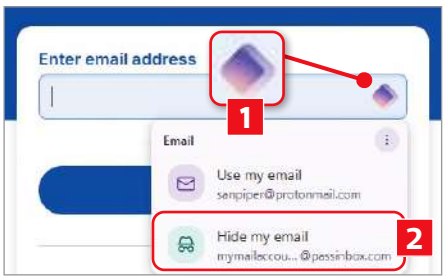
Proton Pass (www.snipca.com/55330) provides a private and secure alternative to the Google Password Manager. It protects your passwords and other data with end-to-end encryption and stores unlimited logins in both its free and paid-for plans.

Whereas Google's tool only works in Chrome and Android, Proton Pass is available in any browser, on any mobile device and on your desktop through its extensions and apps (www.snipca.com/55331).

Disguise your email address with aliases

Proton Pass protects your email address from spammers and scammers using 'Hide my email' aliases. This means when you sign up for a new account or subscribe to a newsletter, you can use a fake email address to stop your real one being leaked or stolen.

Messages sent to your alias are forwarded to your standard Inbox, where you can reply to them from the fake address. You can create 10 aliases in the free Proton Pass plan, and an unlimited number in the paid-for Plus version. This costs £4.09 a month, or £29.98 for a year.



Protect your email address using a Proton Pass alias

The easiest way to use aliases is to install the Proton Pass browser extension. This adds an icon to email boxes (1 in our screenshot above) you can click to generate a 'Hide my email' alias 2. You can also create aliases manually by selecting 'Create a hide-my-email alias' in the extension, Proton Pass website or mobile app.

Import and check the safety of passwords

The Proton Pass extension offers to save your login data when you sign up for or into a website – as does its mobile app if set as your default password manager. You can also add passwords manually and import them from an existing password manager.

Proton provides import instructions for different services at www.snipca.com/55337. To transfer passwords from Google Password Manager, export them from Chrome as a CSV file. Click the Settings cog in the bottom-left corner of the Proton Pass website, select Import, then Chrome and upload the CSV file.

Once imported, you can check the security of your passwords by clicking Pass Monitor. This highlights weak and reused passwords, and those for which you haven't enabled two-factor authentication. Sadly, Proton's dark-web monitoring is only available in its Plus plan.

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In this special offer you can buy **Windows 11 Pro** for just £69.99 – that's £150 cheaper than Microsoft's full price of £219.99.

To buy **Windows 11 Pro**, visit **www.snipca.com/41588** and click the red Buy Now button on the right.

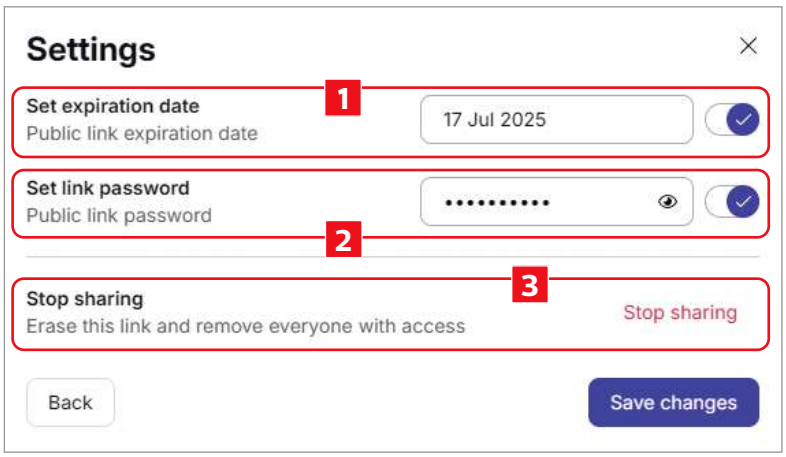
JUST SO YOU KNOW...

This offer can be used by one person only, and expires at midnight on **29 July, 2025**. It's a lifetime licence for one computer.

DITCH GOOGLE DRIVE FOR PROTON DRIVE

Proton Drive (www.snipca.com/55338) is a much more private way to store your files than Google Drive. It doesn't analyse their content using AI, collect metadata about items you upload or comply with government requests to share data.

Most importantly, your files are end-to-end encrypted and only accessible by you. Files in Google Drive are encrypted, but Google holds the encryption keys, so it can decrypt them at any time. Here we outline the best things you can do with Proton Drive.



Proton Drive lets you share files and folders securely with anyone

Share files and folders securely

Proton Drive's free plan gives you 2GB of online storage, compared with 200GB in the Plus version. This costs £4.09 a month or £39.48 a year, but doesn't offer much extra aside from recovering all previous versions of files – the free version limits recovery to the last seven days.

You can increase your free storage to 5GB by clicking the gift icon in the bottom-right corner and completing a checklist of actions within 30 days of signing up. These actions are uploading a file, setting up a recovery method and sharing a file or folder securely.

There's no limit on the size of files you can share, and because they're end-to-end encrypted, only the people you share a link with can view their contents. For extra security when you share files and folders with non-Proton users, you can encrypt the sharing link with a password and set it to expire on a specific date.

Right-click an item and choose Share, then switch on 'Create public link'. Click the Settings cog to set an expiration date for the link (1 in our screenshot above right) and protect it with a password 2. Click 'Save changes' to create a public (but private) link you can share however you want. Anyone who clicks the link will need to enter your password to view the content. To deactivate a link before the expiry date, click 'Stop sharing' 3.

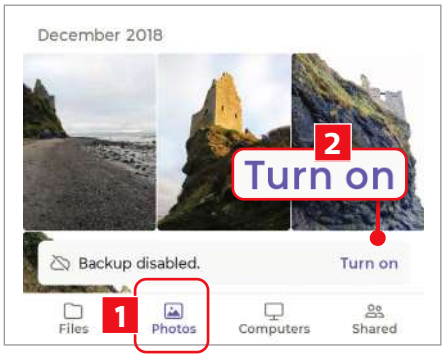
Back up documents and photos automatically

As with other Proton tools, Proton Drive has PC and mobile apps as well as a web version (download them from www.snipca.com/55340). Unlike Proton Mail, you can use its Windows app for free to back up selected folders – such as Desktop, Documents and Pictures – and keep them synced between your computer and online account. Just click 'My computer' in the left-hand menu followed by 'Add folders'.

You can also use the Windows app to import files from Google Drive via Google's Takeout service. See www.snipca.com/55343 for full instructions.

Proton Drive can back up photos and videos automatically from your phone or tablet. These are end-to-encrypted and have their metadata removed to keep their content private.

To activate this option in the Proton Drive app for Android or iOS, press the Photos tab at the bottom of the screen (1 in our screenshot below left), and turn on backup 2. Once you grant Proton Drive permission to access your photos, it will scan your entire library and back up all the images and videos until you hit your storage limit.



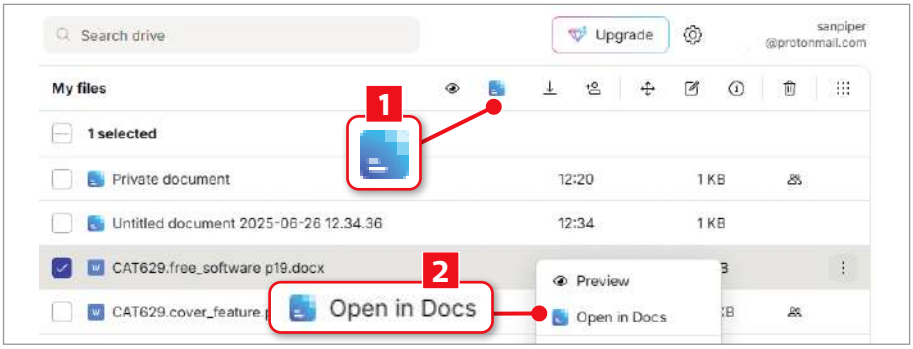
Back up photos stored on your phone to Proton Drive

Create and collaborate on documents

Last year, Proton added a Google Docs-style document editor to Proton Drive. As you'd expect, Proton Docs protects the documents you create and edit with end-to-end encryption, to keep them safe from data breaches, online surveillance and AI.

It has the same sharing features as Proton Drive, so you can collaborate securely with other people by sending them a password-protected and time-limited link. Proton Docs includes a choice of fonts, standard formatting options (such as bold, italics, highlights and alignment) and toolbar buttons for inserting images, links and tables. You can download documents in DOCX, PDF and TXT format.

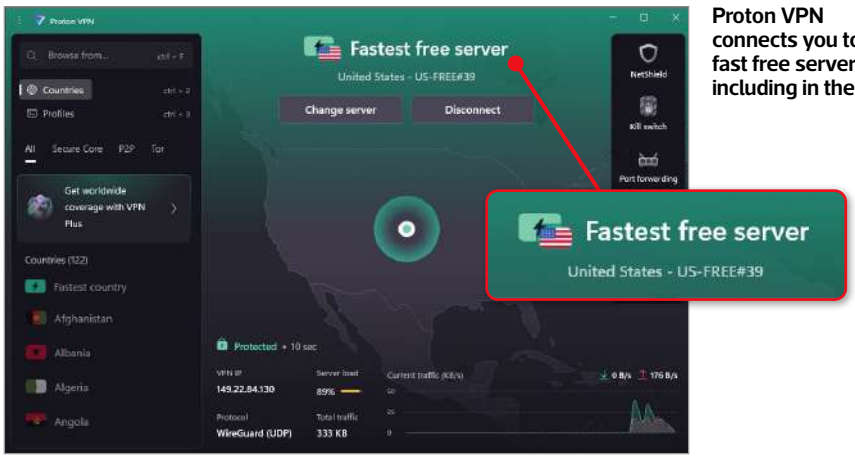
To use it, click the 'New document' button in Proton Drive's top-right toolbar (1 in our screenshot left). You can also edit a document you've uploaded by right-clicking it and selecting 'Open in Docs' 2.



Create, edit and share documents securely using Proton Docs

STAY ANONYMOUS ONLINE WITH PROTON VPN

Browsing the web with Chrome leaves you open to all manner of tracking, data collection and personalised advertising – much of it from Google itself. Back in 2020, Google addressed this criticism by launching its own VPN service to "provide an extra layer of online protection". It discontinued the VPN last year, though it's still available on Google Pixel phones – but you're much better off using Proton VPN (www.snipca.com/55346). Here's why.



Proton VPN connects you to its fast free servers – including in the US

Automatically connect to the fastest server

The free version of Proton VPN automatically connects you to the fastest available free server, so you can browse the web privately and speedily. Servers are located in Japan, Poland, Romania, the United States and the Netherlands.

Although Proton says the nearest server is usually the fastest, it often connects us to a server in the US (see screenshot above right) – handy for unblocking US streaming services. Just click Connect to instantly disguise your location, IP address and activities. Following a recent update, you can also connect by right-clicking Proton VPN's system-tray icon.

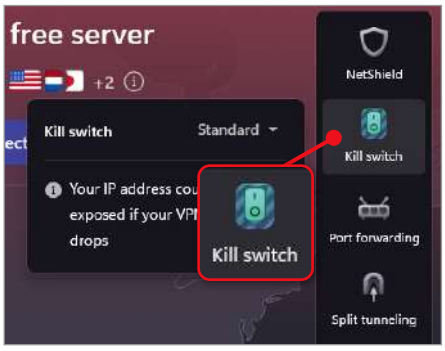
Unusually for a free VPN, there's no limit on your encrypted data usage. Proton VPN has a strict no-logs policy, and no ads or trackers.

Its Plus version, which costs £8.09 per month or £49 a year, lets you choose from more than 13,600 high-speed servers in 122 countries, including some "optimised for streaming". You can have up to 10 simultaneous connections across your PC, mobile devices, smart TV and streaming stick – get the apps from www.snipca.com/55347.

Boost your privacy with expert features

Proton VPN's 'Kill switch' automatically disconnects you from the internet when your VPN connection drops. This prevents your IP address and other sensitive data from being exposed – turn it on by clicking 'Kill switch' (see screenshot below) on the home screen and selecting Standard.

A Plus plan includes additional privacy features that make it worth paying for (it's reasonably priced compared with many VPNs). The NetShield tool blocks ads and trackers, while Secure Core boosts protection by routing traffic through multiple servers. Proton VPN Plus also has a 'Tor over VPN' feature that encrypts your data through the Tor network, and offers split tunnelling for excluding certain software and services from VPN protection.



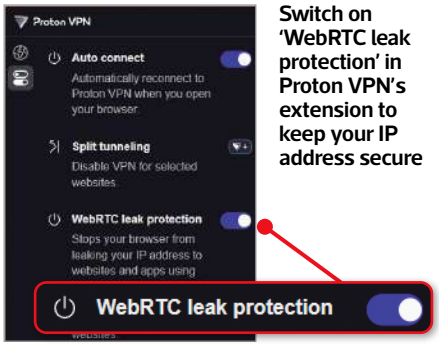
Turn on Proton VPN's 'Kill switch' in case you lose your VPN connection

Use Proton VPN in your browser

Proton VPN's extension for Chromium browsers (www.snipca.com/55348) and Firefox (www.snipca.com/55349) boosts your online privacy at the click of a button, without you having to open the desktop app. It's particularly useful on public Wi-Fi and can potentially unblock US-only content (if you get connected to a US server).

If you use Vivaldi (www.vivaldi.com), you don't need to install the extension, because the browser added Proton VPN earlier this year (www.snipca.com/55350). Click the VPN button in Vivaldi's top-right corner and choose 'Already have a Proton Account' to link Proton with Vivaldi.

The built-in Vivaldi tool looks and works just like the Proton VPN extension, with the same restrictions for free users. Both let you switch on 'WebRTC leak protection' (see screenshot below) to stop your browser leaking your IP address - click the Features (sliders) button to find this option.


Proton VPN
Auto connect
Automatically reconnect to Proton VPN when you open your browser
Split tunneling
Disable VPN for selected websites
WebRTC leak protection
Stops your browser from leaking your IP address to websites and apps using
WebRTC leak protection

Switch on 'WebRTC leak protection' in Proton VPN's extension to keep your IP address secure

Split the cost of a Proton subscription

Last August, Proton introduced a Duo plan to "make online privacy easy for two people" (www.snipca.com/55352). This gives you and your partner, or a friend or family member, everything in Proton Unlimited (see page 51), but for a lower price than paying for two separate accounts: £147.48 a year compared with £196.56.

That includes a whopping 1TB of encrypted storage, plus a bonus 15GB every year, and Proton Scribe (see page 53). You get individual logins, so you can keep your Proton emails, files and other data to yourself.

Alternatively, the Proton Family plan (www.snipca.com/55353) offers all Proton's tools to up to six family members, and 3TB of storage (plus an extra 20GB). It costs £221.22 a year.

DITCH GOOGLE CALENDAR FOR PROTON CALENDAR

Proton Calendar (www.snipca.com/55354) lets you plan your life more privately than Google Calendar. Unlike that tool, it can't see the titles, descriptions and locations of events, or details of people you've invited to them, and it secures your calendar data with Proton's end-to-end encryption.

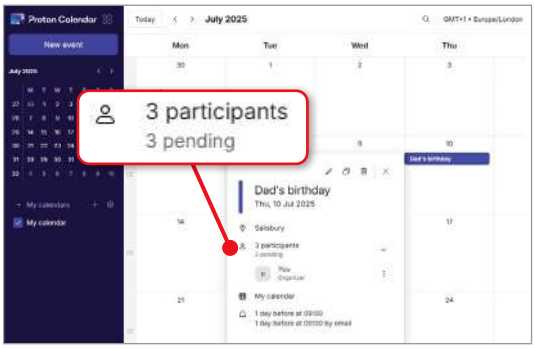
When you sign up for a Proton Mail account, you automatically get access to Proton Calendar and you share your online storage between the two services. Unlike other Proton tools, it doesn't have its own paid-for plan (that's covered by Proton Mail Plus), but it does have free Android and iOS apps (www.snipca.com/55355).

Add and encrypt events

Adding and editing events is as simple as in Google Calendar. You can specify the time and location, schedule reminders, provide a description and invite participants by entering their email addresses (see screenshot below) – they don't need to be Proton users.

Proton's encryption is applied automatically and also protects events *you've* been invited to and have added to your calendar. Note that to share a calendar, or set up a Zoom meeting, you need to upgrade to Proton Mail Plus.

Proton recently introduced widgets for Calendar's mobile apps. These let you add events and view details of upcoming ones directly from the home screen of your phone or tablet.



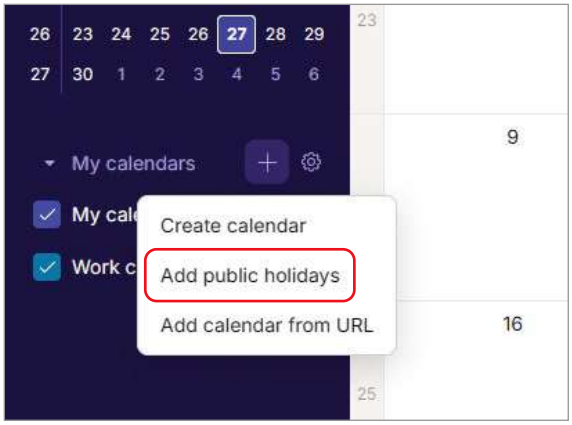
Add events to Proton Calendar and invite people to them, without compromising your privacy

Secure your existing calendars

You can import and encrypt your Google Calendar using Proton's 'Import via Easy Switch' feature (see page 52). Either tick the Calendar box when you import your Gmail messages to Proton Mail or do it directly in Proton Calendar.

Click the Settings cog top-right, choose 'All settings' and click 'Import/export'. Select 'Import from Google' and grant Proton access to your account. Use the 'Import from ICS' option to import calendars from other services.

Proton Calendar also lets you add and encrypt public and shared calendars. Click the plus sign next to 'My calendars' in the left-hand sidebar, choose 'Add calendar from URL' and paste the calendar's web address. Select 'Add public holidays' (see screenshot above) to show UK public holidays in your calendar. To add more than three calendars, you need Proton Mail Plus. ca



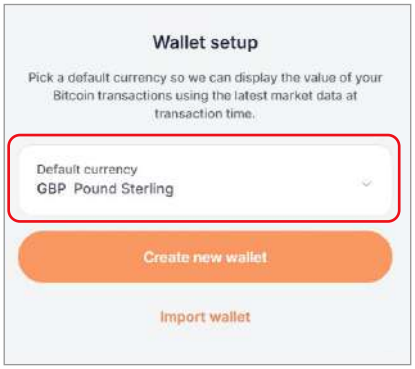
You can include UK public holidays in your Proton Calendar

Buy and send Bitcoin securely

Proton's newest tool is likely to be its least interesting for most users: a digital wallet for sending, receiving and buying Bitcoin. But for those who dabble in cryptocurrency, or are tempted to, Proton Wallet (www.snipca.com/55361) is a secure and reliable option.

It protects your coins with end-to-end encryption and makes it easy to buy Bitcoin via credit card or bank transfer, through Proton's 'financial partners'. Sending someone Bitcoin is as simple as sending them an email, with no risk of entering the wrong 26-character Bitcoin address.

Proton Wallet gives you two accounts: one for receiving Bitcoin from anyone, and the other for speedier transfers from other Proton users to your Proton Mail email address. You can use Proton Wallet online and via its free apps for Android (www.snipca.com/55363) and iOS (www.snipca.com/55364). Set 'GBP Pound Sterling' as the currency (see screenshot) when you create your wallet.


Wallet setup
Pick a default currency so we can display the value of your Bitcoin transactions using the latest market data at transaction time.
Default currency
GBP Pound Sterling
Create new wallet
Import wallet

NEXT ISSUE On sale Wednesday 30 July

ON SALE Weds 30 July

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You can't afford to ignore these changes

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We've waited years for
tools that actually wor
– and here they are!
Block on Android phones
Block on iPhones
Block on landlines
Block on your network
Block on WhatsApp
Block spam messages too
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you MUST use – and 20 awfu
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PLUS
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Write complaint letters that work
Create images quickly from text
No ads in results (ditch Google!)
Everything you can do FOR FREE!
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AVOID LANDLINE SWITCH-OFF SCAMS
DON'T UPGRADE TO WINDOWS 11 24H2
PLUS REMOVE COPILOT FROM YOUR COMPUTER

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Hack your car's USB port

You already use it to charge your phone, but your car's USB port can do so much more. **Jonathan Parkyn** explains how to unlock its full potential

Car manufacturers started building USB ports into the dashboards of premium models around the mid-2000s. These days you'll find a USB connection in pretty much every car on the road – typically USB-A but sometimes the newer USB-C. For most of us, the in-car USB socket is just a convenient way to turn our vehicle into a giant, four-wheeled phone charger. But that humble little socket has more tricks up its sleeve – as we'll explain.

Charge your devices faster

If you've ever plugged your phone into your car's USB port only to discover the battery level has barely budged by the end of your journey, it's because many ports – especially those in older vehicles – aren't designed to deliver much power. Some were intended purely as a data connection – for plugging in MP3 players, for example. Many supply as little as 0.5 amps at five volts – just 2.5W. That's painfully slow for powering modern devices.

To get more than just a trickle of power, use the 12V socket instead. This often-overlooked port (better known as the cigarette lighter) can provide a power output of between 120W and 150W, depending on the vehicle's age and type. That's enough to deliver fast-charging speeds to even the most power-hungry devices, including laptops and tablets. Some modern cars may even have multiple 12V ports – on the dashboard, in the rear seats and in the boot.

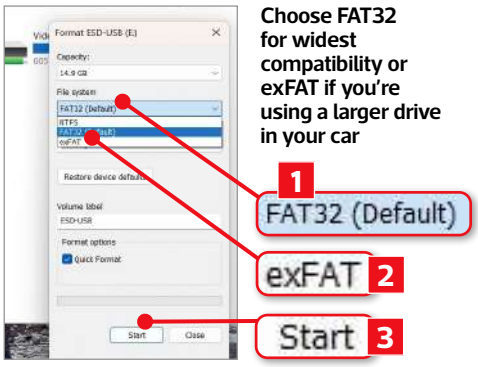
The only problem is that, in most cases, you can't just plug your devices straight in. To take full advantage of the 12V socket, you'll need a USB adapter. These aren't expensive but as with anything related to power delivery and charging we'd advise against buying cheap unbranded products for safety reasons.

We'd also suggest getting one with multiple ports – USB-A and USB-C – for maximum compatibility, and so that you can charge two or more devices on the go. Look for one that supports the USB Power Delivery (PD) or Quick Charge (QC) fast-charging standards, such as the Ugreen Car Charger 130W (£17 from www.snipca.com/55408, pictured left), which can deliver up to 100W to a single device, and charge three devices at once.

This 130W UGREEN charger powers devices quickly and has both USB-A and USB-C ports

Play music from USB drives

Most in-car USB ports let you play music files directly from a USB stick, letting you enjoy your favourite tunes through the car's touchscreen – typically called an infotainment system – without having to fiddle around with Bluetooth connections or phone cables. If you've never been able to make this work, it's probably because your car is being fussy about formats.

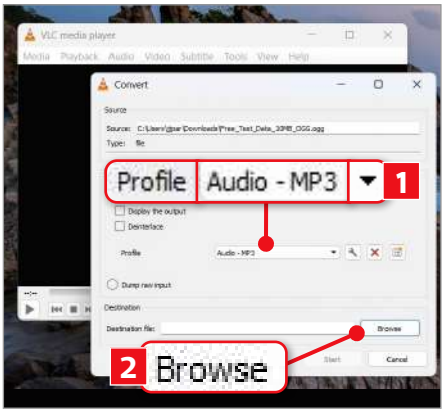


Choose FAT32 for widest compatibility or exFAT if you're using a larger drive in your car

First, there's the file-system format of the USB stick itself. If your drive is formatted as NTFS your car's infotainment system might not be recognised at all.

To check and – if necessary – reformat the drive, plug it into your PC, open File Explorer, click This PC, then right-click the drive and select Format. Check under File System to see how the drive is currently formatted. Choose FAT32 from the dropdown menu (for widest compatibility, 1 in our screenshot above), or exFAT 2 if your car supports it and you're using a 32GB (or bigger) drive. Finally click Start 3 – but be aware this will erase everything on the drive, so back up any files you want to keep first.

Music file formats can also be a problem. MP3 is the most universally supported format. Some in-car systems may support AAC, OGG, FLAC and others, but don't count on it. Streaming formats like Apple's M4P or Spotify



Use VLC Media Player to convert non-DRM files to MP3 to play in your car

downloads won't work due to DRM (digital rights management). You can convert non-DRM music formats to MP3 using VLC Media Player (free from www.videolan.org). In VLC, click Media, then Convert/Save. In the window that opens, click Add, select your music file(s), and click Open. Click Convert/Save at the bottom and select 'Audio – MP3' in the Profile dropdown menu (1 in our screenshot above). Click Browse 2 to select your save location, then click Start.

Bear in mind that some in-car systems struggle with large flash-memory drives especially 32GB and over. A USB 2.0 stick between 8GB and 16GB is usually a safer bet. Also, organise your files in a clear folder structure, such as Artist then Album, to help your car read the data correctly.

Power your dashcam – even when you're parked

Most dashcams plug into your car's USB port and don't require much power, so even a 2.5W socket usually does the job. However, many cars cut power to the USB port as soon as you remove the key or switch off the engine, killing the dashcam's ability to record while parked. Check whether your car's USB port stays working by plugging in a phone, turning off the ignition and seeing whether the device keeps charging. If it stops, you could try the same experiment with your car's 12V socket (using a USB adapter, as explained earlier).

If your USB ports don't provide power when the ignition is off, consider 'hard-wiring' your dashcam to the car's fusebox. This is fairly straightforward if you're comfortable with some in-car electrical DIY. Hard-wiring kits – like the Nextbase pack pictured below – cost around £10 to £20 (www.snipca.com/55421) and include everything you need. Just make sure the kit matches your vehicle's fuse type and your dashcam's connector. If you're not confident carrying out the job, ask your dashcam retailer or local garage if they offer installation.

Another option is to use a dedicated battery pack to keep your dashcam running while parked. These work like power banks, charging themselves while you drive, then powering the dashcam when the engine is off. Standard power banks usually won't switch on and off automatically with your car's ignition,

Hard-wiring kits like this one from Nextbase cost no more than £20

Fix Android Auto or Apple CarPlay problems

Newer cars sometimes have multiple USB ports, and some of these may be for charging only. So, if you're having connectivity problems with Android Auto or Apple CarPlay, plug your phone into a different port to see if that fixes the issue. You could also try using a different USB cable – the shorter (around 1m) the better.

You usually need to unlock your phone before connecting it. And when you plug it in for the first time – or after an update – you may be prompted to 'Allow access' or set up the connection. Make sure you act on these prompts, including any that appear on your infotainment screen.

Sometimes, simply restarting your phone – and your car's system – can cure connection glitches. It's also worth updating your phone's operating system to rule out bugs. And you may want to consider asking your car dealer to update your car's infotainment software (if you can't or don't want to update it yourself).

It's worth remembering that some cars only support wireless connections for Android Auto or Apple CarPlay – check your vehicle's manual for more information.

Dashcam batteries like this BlackVue model are expensive and fiddly to install

and they're not built to handle the extreme temperatures inside a parked vehicle. Dedicated dashcam batteries, such as the BlackVue B-130X, are expensive (around £400 from Halfords, www.snipca.com/55420, pictured above), and can be fiddly to install.

Update your firmware

It's not widely advertised, but some car manufacturers – including Ford – let you install software updates yourself using a USB stick. You'll usually need to visit the official website or open the mobile app, enter your vehicle's identification number (VIN), and download the correct update files for your model.

Once downloaded, copy the files to a USB stick that's been correctly formatted (typically FAT32 or exFAT – see 'Play music from USB drives' section). Plug it into your car's USB port and follow the on-screen instructions via the infotainment system. The update process can take a while, so make sure the engine is running and the car is parked in a safe place before you begin.

This can save you a trip to the dealer if your sat-nav is out of date or your infotainment system keeps crashing. But not all manufacturers support USB updates, and there are risks. Lose power mid-update and you could corrupt the system. And using unofficial firmware could void your warranty. ca

Avoid scams using AI

16:07
Unknown Contact
Today at 16:07
We apologize for the inconvenience, but our delivery driver was unable to deliver your package as scheduled. Please click the link
SCAM
Message

When you're unsure whether an email or text message is genuine, ask AI to check it for you. **Robert Irvine** tests the best free AI tools for detecting scams

While AI has many frivolous uses, it also has practical benefits for the security of your data and devices. Most paid-for antivirus software now incorporates AI to detect and block the latest threats, and there are now several free tools that use AI to identify email, text-message and WhatsApp scams.

With phishing and smishing scams becoming increasingly convincing, AI can alert you to suspicious content and stop you opening dangerous links. By sharing examples of scams, you also help improve these tools' detection rates. Here, we test five AI scam detectors to discover which provides the most reliable results and advice.

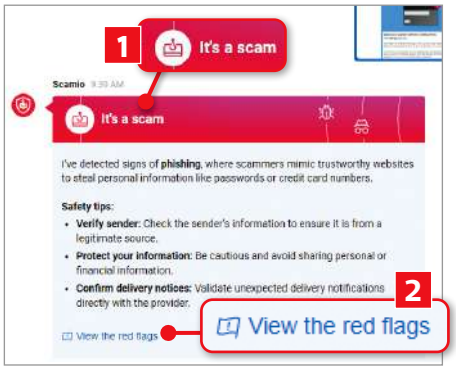
GOLD AWARD

Bitdefender Scamio

www.snipca.com/55366

Launched in December 2023, Bitdefender Scamio was one of the first AI-powered scam detectors, and we believe it's the best. It doesn't have a mobile app, so you don't need to install anything, and is free to use online and in WhatsApp and Messenger, once you've signed up for a free Bitdefender account.

You can chat to Scamio like you're messaging a real person and easily upload images, or paste text and links, to have it analyse the content for evidence of scams. It works by checking emails, texts and WhatsApp messages for elements such as sender information, message structure and language patterns. It also compares the content with Bitdefender's 'predefined rules' and huge database of known scams and phishing attempts. The more examples you upload, the more adept Scamio becomes at spotting future tricks.


1
It's a scam
Scamio
It's a scam
I've detected signs of phishing, where scammers mimic trustworthy websites to steal personal information like passwords or credit card numbers.
Safety tips:
Verify sender: Check the sender's information to ensure it is from a legitimate source.
Protect your information: Be cautious and avoid sharing personal or financial information.
Confirm delivery notices: Validate unexpected delivery notifications directly with the provider.
2
View the red flags

Bitdefender Scamio is the best free AI tool for detecting scams

In our tests, Scamio quickly identified as scams the phishing emails purporting to be from Amazon and Apple (1 in our screenshot above). It concluded that our delayed-delivery and parking-violation messages looked suspicious and were likely to be scams that could steal our personal data. Scamio was also correct about the genuine delivery message, deeming it safe and from a legitimate source.

Bitdefender provides basic safety tips for avoiding scams and you can click the 'View the red flags' link 2 to see the giveaway signs in the messages you've submitted.

SILVER AWARD

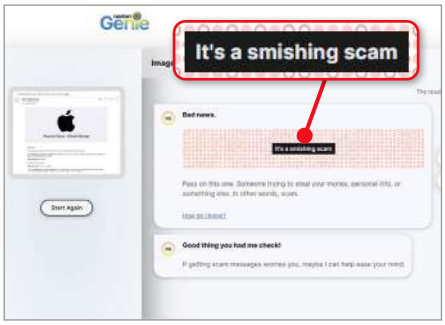
Norton Genie

www.snipca.com/55380

Norton Genie has Android and iOS apps and a web version, so you can use it on your PC, phone and tablet. You don't need to create an account or type a message – just add an image or paste some suspicious text and either tap 'Scan now' or click 'Begin scan'.

On the downside, you need to start a new chat each time – whereas Scamio lets you continue a conversation – and Norton Genie's scan results aren't always reliable. It correctly detected our text messages were "definitely a scam", and said the real message probably wasn't. But though it spotted the phishing emails, it wrongly identified the Apple one as a smishing scam (see screenshot below) and the Amazon email as only potentially a scam.

In some instances, Norton Genie asks for your consent to investigate further, warning "there may be side effects" –



Norton rightly identified a phishing email, but labelled it a smishing scam

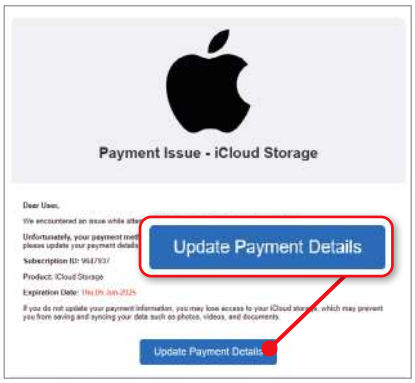
How we tested the scam detectors

We uploaded screenshots of four examples of scams for analysis and to help train the AI tools. Two of these were convincing-looking phishing emails, supposedly from Amazon and Apple. They told us to update our payment details immediately (see screenshot) or our Prime account would be suspended and we'd lose all our data stored in iCloud.

We also submitted two text-message scams. One accused us of violating parking restrictions, with a link to pay the fine to avoid further penalty. The other said our (non-existent) Evri delivery had been delayed, telling us to update the shipping information right away.

To check for false positives, we also asked the AI scam detectors to analyse a real text message from a delivery firm. This contained an order-tracking link but nothing dangerous, so shouldn't be flagged as suspicious.

One tool we didn't test is Trend Micro ScamCheck for Android and iOS (www.snipca.com/55386). Although this excellent app offers several ways to detect and block scams, it's only free for 30 days, then costs £1.99 a month.



such as a scammer knowing you've opened their link. Doing so produces a more accurate assessment, but it's also an extra step. We like that you can select 'How do I know?' to see Norton's reasoning for its results and click 'Anything I should do?' to read its safety advice.

BRONZE AWARD

Malwarebytes Scam Guard

www.snipca.com/55385

Scam Guard is a new feature in the Malwarebytes Mobile Security app, though it hasn't been added to its desktop software. You can use it for free once you skip past the screens showing options for a Malwarebytes subscription.

Of all the tools we tested, Scam Guard is the most like a ChatGPT-style AI assistant, and usefully saves your chat history for future reference. Type a query, then select a screenshot of a suspicious email, text or WhatsApp message – or take a photo with your phone's camera.

Scam Guard's responses are fast and impressively detailed, providing a breakdown of why the content may or may not be a scam, and providing advice about what you should do next. It doesn't colour-code its conclusions like other tools, so you need to read its full 'assessments' for information.

Although it correctly identified all our scam emails and texts, Scam Guard was less sure about the legitimate delivery message. Rather than make a judgment, it offered to report the courier's link to the Malwarebytes Threat Intelligence team for further analysis (see screenshot below left).

BEST OF THE REST

Ask Silver

www.ask-silver.com

Ask Silver works exclusively in WhatsApp – sign up for a free account, then scan a QR code with your phone's camera to chat to the AI assistant in the messaging app. Attach a screenshot or photo of a suspicious email, text message or leaflet, and Ask Silver will scan it for red flags.

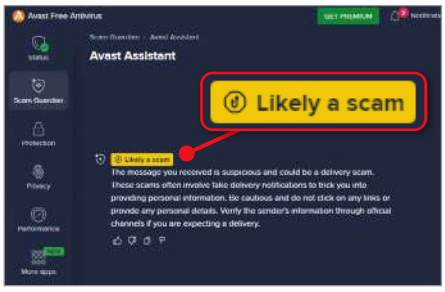
Its analysis is clear and concise, explaining exactly why a message looks suspicious, such as an unusual domain, lack of personalisation or pressure to act quickly. It correctly identified all the messages we shared in our chat as either definite scams or suspicious (see screenshot below left), and knew our genuine courier text was safe.

Ask Silver offers to report potential scams to the National Cyber Security Centre, but it doesn't provide much safety advice other than not to open links in suspect messages. Hopefully, it will add support for messaging apps other than WhatsApp.

Avast Scam Guardian

www.snipca.com/55382

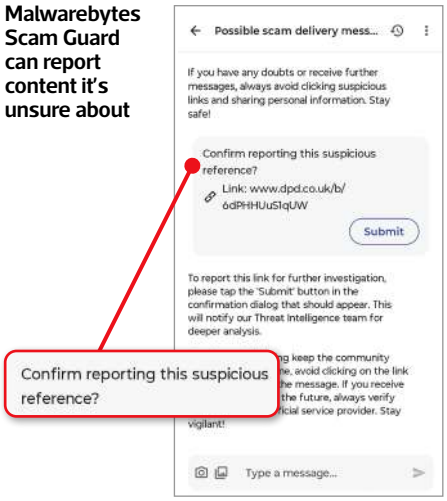
Scam Guardian is a new feature in Avast's free and paid-for antivirus software, but its Avast Assistant component for spotting scams is only available in the Windows version – not Avast's mobile apps. This means you can't analyse screenshots of suspicious text and WhatsApp messages directly on your phone, but need to first save them to your PC.



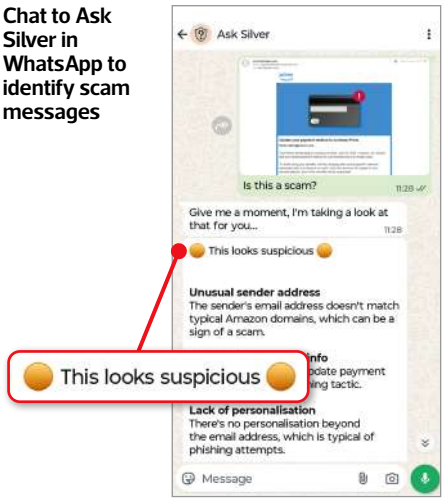
Avast's scam-detection tool is only available in its PC software

It also entails installing the whole Avast Free Antivirus security suite, declining the option to set Avast Secure Browser as your default browser and ignoring the prompts to upgrade to the Premium version. Avast Assistant correctly identified all our scams, with cursory explanations of its conclusions, but thought the safe message we received from a courier firm was also suspicious (see screenshot above). ca

Malwarebytes Scam Guard can report content it's unsure about


Possible scam delivery mess...
If you have any doubts or receive further messages, always avoid clicking suspicious links and sharing personal information. Stay safe!
Confirm reporting this suspicious reference?
Link: www.dpd.co.uk/b/6dPHHUuS1qUW
Submit
To report this link for further investigation, please tap the 'Submit' button in the confirmation dialog that should appear. This will notify our Threat Intelligence team for deeper analysis.
Type a message...
Confirm reporting this suspicious reference?

Chat to Ask Silver in WhatsApp to identify scam messages


Ask Silver
Is this a scam?
Give me a moment, I'm taking a look at that for you...
This looks suspicious
Unusual sender address
The sender's email address doesn't match typical Amazon domains, which can be a sign of a scam.
Lack of personalisation
There's no personalisation beyond the email address, which is typical of phishing attempts.
Message
This looks suspicious

Problems Solved

Our experts solve all your tech problems

PROBLEM OF THE FORTNIGHT

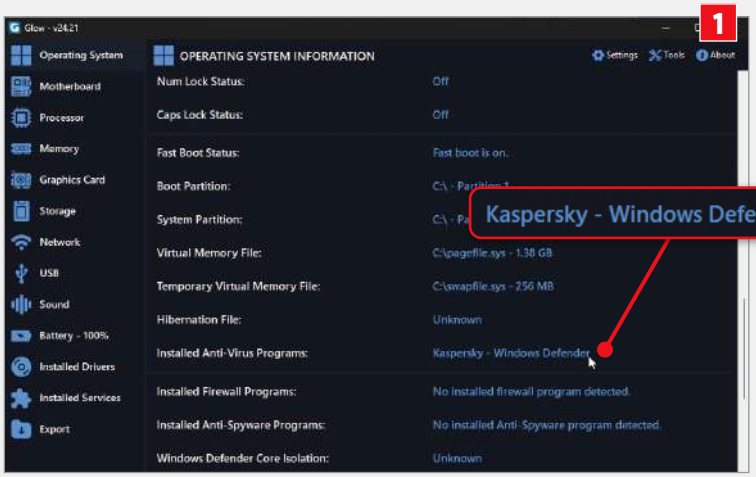
Why is Kaspersky still on my PC?

Q After reading a recommendation in your Cover Feature back in Issue 700, I downloaded and installed system-analysis tool Glow (www.snipca.com/52372) and was fascinated by all the information it gave me. However, I was surprised to find that Kaspersky antivirus and firewall software were installed on my PC. I used these in the past but switched to Bitdefender a few years ago.

I contacted Kaspersky's support, and they told me to download and run its Kavremover removal tool (www.snipca.com/55187), which I did. However, Glow still reported that Kaspersky software was installed. Kaspersky then suggested doing a 'system dump' using its Get System Info tool. This generated a very detailed report, but I'm reluctant to send this information to Kaspersky.

Is it possible that Glow's report is wrong, or is Kaspersky still active on my PC? Should I be worried that there are leftover traces of Kaspersky? And is it even possible to eliminate them if Kaspersky's own uninstall software can't manage it?

Vee Kumar



1 **Glow can detect leftovers of programs you've uninstalled**

A We certainly understand your concern, but we very much doubt that you still have any Kaspersky software installed on your PC. Glow and similar tools scour the Windows registry to gather information. Typically, the registry is full of entries that might make a tool such as Glow think a piece of software is present when, in fact, it's just a digital leftover (see screenshot 1).

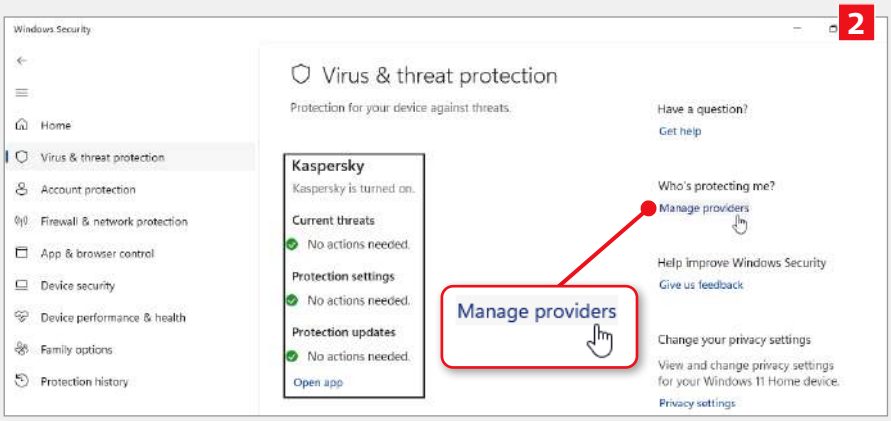
Of course, you'd hope a dedicated clean-up tool such as Kavremover would do a more thorough job. However, this is a difficult task, especially when multiple versions of a product have been installed on a PC over a number of years. Kavremover certainly deletes Kaspersky's apps and services, but deleting entries from the registry can be risky, so it is sensibly cautious in this regard.

The result is that remnants are left behind that Glow misinterprets. You could delve into the registry manually to look for and delete all Kaspersky entries, or use third-party software to attempt to do the same, but we couldn't honestly recommend either method.

Why? Because, as we mentioned, meddling with the registry risks destabilising your system. So, if Bitdefender is running without problems, we'd advise ignoring these phantom entries. While we accept it's annoying that these leftovers remain, they're not a threat, whereas trying to clear them from the registry might be.

If you're still concerned, you can check which antivirus and firewall tools you're using. To do so, click the Start button followed by the Settings cog, then 'Privacy & security' followed by Windows Security. Next, click Open Windows Security and then, under the 'Protection areas' heading, click 'Virus & threat protection'. Now click 'Virus & threat protection settings' or 'Firewall & network protection'.

We're confident that what you'll see here will be Bitdefender (alongside Microsoft Defender), not Kaspersky. In the very unlikely event that it tells you Kaspersky is still active, click the 'Manage providers' link 2, then use the options in the 'Security providers' box to set your preferences.



2 **Go to 'Privacy & security' in Settings to see which antivirus tools are active**

Why can't I eject my external backup drive?

Q Thank you for your magazine and all the help it provides me and my fellow readers. I have a little problem that I haven't been able to solve. I connect a large external drive to my PC once a month as part of my backup routine and use Macrium Reflect as my backup software. This has worked well for several years, but two months ago it started giving me a problem. I can't eject the drive after the backup is complete, because a message tells me it's still in use. I've researched the problem online and tried many possible solutions but nothing has worked. Now I have to switch off the PC just to remove the drive safely. Any help would be appreciated.

Robin Dew

Problem Ejecting USB Attached SCSI (UAS) Mass Storage Device
This device is currently in use. Close any programs or windows that might be using the device and then try again.
OK

An SSD designed for internal use may resist your attempts to eject it

A We can see from the error message you sent us that your backup drive uses USB Attached SCSI Protocol, or UASP (see screenshot). This suggests you're using a drive designed for internal use in an external caddy – which is presumably why you feel you need to eject it after use.

Unlike USB sticks, internal SSDs aren't designed to be routinely ejected, so they clear their cache only when the drive's own controller decides, which is typically when Windows shuts down. Your attempts to eject the drive fail because the controller is telling Windows it's still busy even if it isn't. You can get round this problem by disabling the drive's caching, which may slow things down a little, but won't matter much for backups that run in the background.

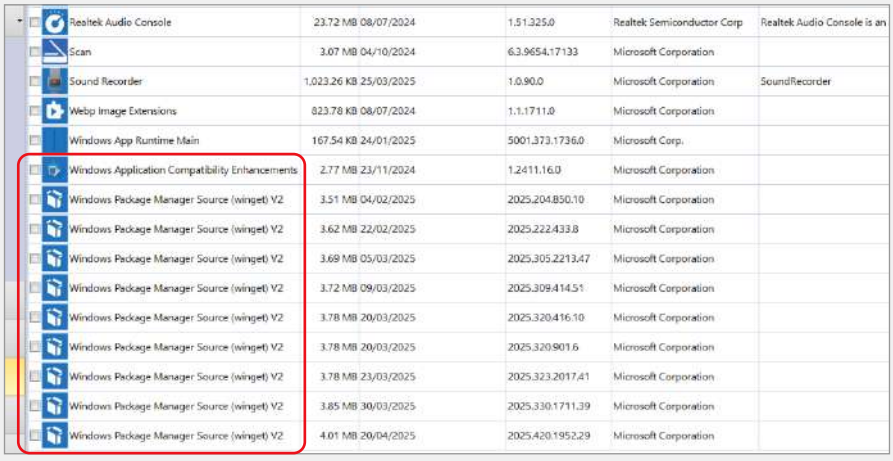
The fact the drive was working in the past without problems suggests this is how it was set up originally, but perhaps a recent Windows update has changed the relevant setting.

To fix it, first press Windows key+E to open File Explorer, then right-click the drive and choose Properties. Next, select the Hardware tab, then click to select the relevant drive before clicking Properties again. Next, in the General tab, click the 'Change settings' button. Then select the Policies tab. Finally, depending on which version of Windows you're using, either untick 'Enable write caching on this device' or choose the 'Quick removal' option. Click OK and that should be that.

Why are Winget files multiplying on my PC?

Q While exploring my PC recently I found something called Winget growing on my hard drive. It seems to be generating new files at an incredible rate, and it seems that if I keep the computer long enough, I'll soon be drowning in them. Can you help?

Ian Fairclough


Realtek Audio Console 23.72 MB 08/07/2024 1.51.325.0 Realtek Semiconductor Corp Realtek Audio Console is an
Scan 3.07 MB 04/10/2024 6.3.9654.17133 Microsoft Corporation
Sound Recorder 1,023.26 KB 25/03/2025 1.0.90.0 Microsoft Corporation SoundRecorder
Webp Image Extensions 823.78 KB 08/07/2024 1.1.1711.0 Microsoft Corporation
Windows App Runtime Main 167.54 KB 24/01/2025 5001.373.1736.0 Microsoft Corp.
Windows Application Compatibility Enhancements 2.77 MB 23/11/2024 1.2411.16.0 Microsoft Corporation
Windows Package Manager Source (winget) V2 3.51 MB 04/02/2025 2025.204.850.10 Microsoft Corporation
Windows Package Manager Source (winget) V2 3.62 MB 22/02/2025 2025.222.433.8 Microsoft Corporation
Windows Package Manager Source (winget) V2 3.69 MB 05/03/2025 2025.305.2213.47 Microsoft Corporation
Windows Package Manager Source (winget) V2 3.72 MB 09/03/2025 2025.309.414.51 Microsoft Corporation
Windows Package Manager Source (winget) V2 3.78 MB 20/03/2025 2025.320.416.10 Microsoft Corporation
Windows Package Manager Source (winget) V2 3.78 MB 20/03/2025 2025.320.901.6 Microsoft Corporation
Windows Package Manager Source (winget) V2 3.78 MB 23/03/2025 2025.323.2017.41 Microsoft Corporation
Windows Package Manager Source (winget) V2 3.85 MB 30/03/2025 2025.330.1711.39 Microsoft Corporation
Windows Package Manager Source (winget) V2 4.01 MB 20/04/2025 2025.420.1952.29 Microsoft Corporation

A glitch in Microsoft Store's cache may cause Winget files to multiply on your PC

A Winget, or the Windows Package Manager, is a tool built into Windows that helps developers manage software installations. From the screenshot you sent (right), it does seem to have gone haywire on your system.

We're not sure why this has happened, but we doubt it's anything malicious. A more likely explanation is that Windows suffered a glitch during a previous software installation, and is creating new versions of Winget every time you install something new.

Thankfully, the tool is very small so it's unlikely to overwhelm your system. However, it's worth trying to fix the problem. We think it's probably down to the Microsoft Store, or more specifically, the cache it uses. A corrupted cache can cause hiccups like this, so resetting it might solve your problem.

Press Windows+R to open a Run box, then type wsreset.exe before clicking OK or pressing Enter. You won't see any obvious consequences, although Microsoft Store might launch. However, this will clear the cache and hopefully prevent your Winget instances multiplying any further. Let us know how you get on.

Why can't I upgrade my PC to Windows 11 24H2?

Q I'm hoping you can help me. I have Windows 11 22H2 version installed on my PC, but despite trying many times to upgrade to 24H2, it always fails with a random error code. Any ideas?

George Spiteri

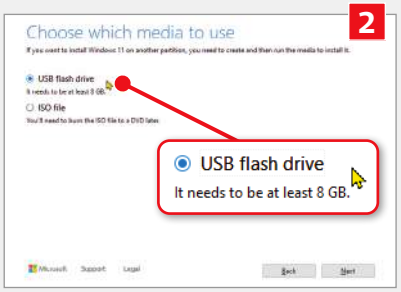
A Finding the underlying cause of Windows-upgrade problems is notoriously difficult. In such circumstances, your best bet is to try upgrading manually using Microsoft's media-creation tool, which you can download for free from www.snipca.com/55062.

Under the 'Create Windows 11 Installation Media' heading, click Download Now (see screenshot 1). Double-click the file that downloads, then follow the prompts to create a bootable USB stick 2.

Restart your PC with this USB stick inserted, then follow the prompts to carry out the upgrade – making sure you choose the option to keep your personal files and apps.

1
Windows 11 Installation Assistant
Create Windows 11 Installation Media
Download Now
Download Windows 11 Disk Image (ISO) for x64 devices

Download the free Windows Media Creation tool from Microsoft's website



Choose this option to create a bootable USB stick you can use to install a manual update

Why is my tablet infested with adverts?

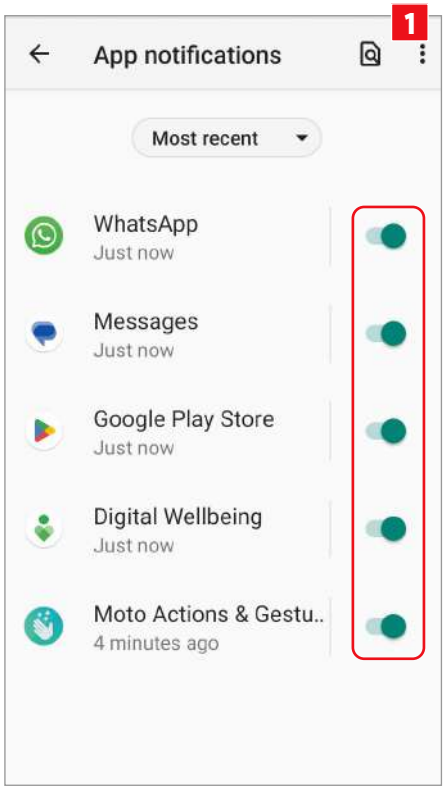
Q It seems I can't use my Samsung Galaxy Tab (SM-X110) tablet for more than a few minutes before I'm bombarded with adverts. I've looked at ad blockers but it seems they're either expensive or work only on particular websites. How can I avoid this deluge of advertising? It is driving me nuts.

Peter Waterman

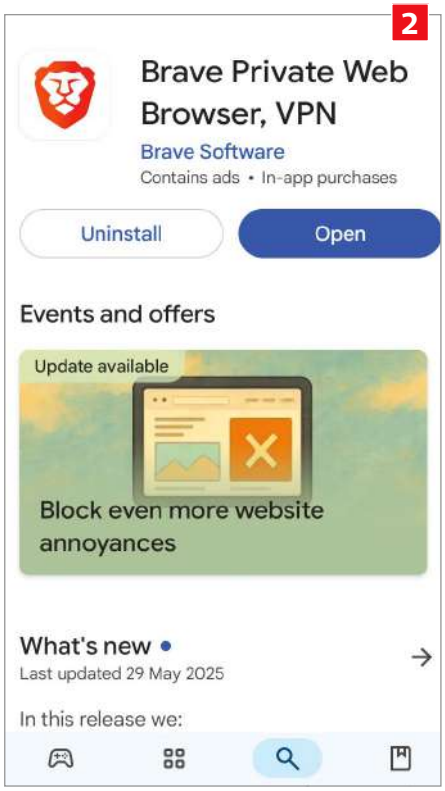
A Online adverts are nothing new, and they're not the fault of your particular tablet. There are various ways they can interrupt your tablet use, however, including through notifications and programs that have found their way on to your tablet.

First, we'd check in the Apps (or 'Apps & notifications') section of Settings for any apps you didn't install and that you definitely don't want, and uninstall them. Next, still in Settings, check in the Notifications page to see which apps have permission to show notifications (see screenshot 1), again disabling any you don't want or need. Also, make sure your version of Android is up to date by going into Settings followed by System, and then 'Software updates'.

Finally, while paid-for ad-blockers certainly exist, there are also plenty of free ad-blocking browsers, such as Brave – get it from the Google Play Store, at www.snipca.com/55064 2. Try using this instead of Chrome or whichever browser you're currently using, and you should find that the number of annoying adverts you see online reduces considerably.



Check which apps can send you notifications in the 'App notifications' section of Settings



Download free ad-blocking browsers, such as Brave, to reduce annoying online adverts

Q: What's eating all my laptop storage?

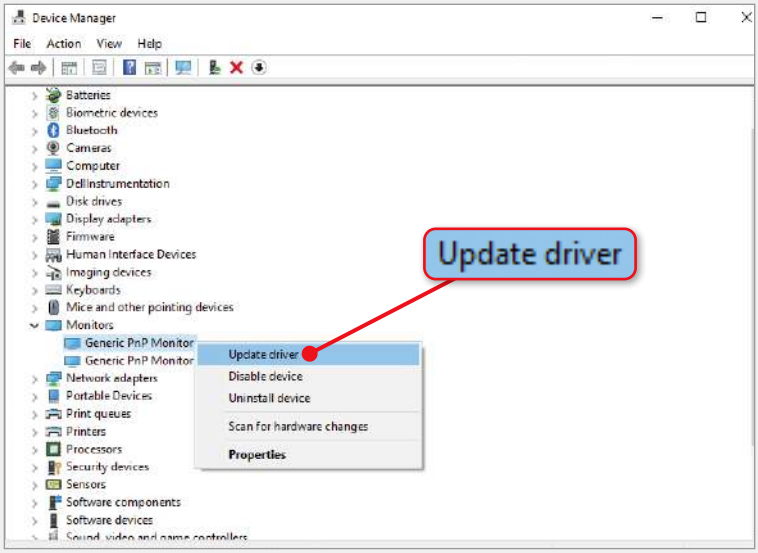
A: Issue 695, page 65 – find it on our 2024 Back Issue CD

Buy it from www.snipca.com/53433

What are these monitor driver files I've downloaded?

Q I remembered something I read in your excellent magazine last year about using a Windows slider to control a monitor's brightness, so I went to the Philips website to find a dedicated driver for my monitor. I eventually found the relevant one and downloaded the driver set, which arrived as a ZIP file. When I unzipped this, I found three files with the extensions CAT, ICM and INF. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do with these. I was expecting to find an EXE file that I could double-click. Have I downloaded the wrong files? Or is there another download I need before I can install this on my system? Any advice would be appreciated.

James Harper



Select 'Update driver' in Device Manager and locate the driver you want to install

A This is perfectly normal for monitor drivers. The INF (information) file in effect gives Windows all the instructions it needs to set everything up. Rather than double-clicking an EXE file as you expected, you perform this task in Device Manager.

To access this, first press Windows key+X to open the Quick Link menu then click Device Manager. Next, under the Monitors category, right-click the name of your monitor and, from the pop-up menu, choose 'Update driver' (see screenshot).

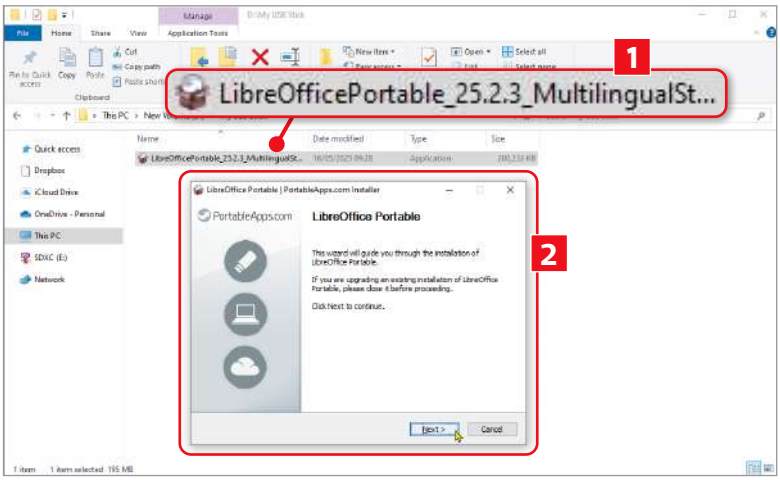
Next, click 'Browse my computer for drivers' followed by the Browse button, then navigate to the folder that contains the files you downloaded from the Philips website. Click to select this folder, then click Next.

Provided the INF file is in the folder you select, Windows will install the driver for you. When it has finished, the name of your monitor will appear on screen, and Windows will tell you it has installed the best driver. Confirm this message by clicking Close.

Why can't I make portable LibreOffice work?

Q I use LibreOffice because it's free and open source. In the past I had a copy of LibreOffice Portable that I'd downloaded to a USB stick. However, when I tried to download it again recently, I found it doesn't run as it did before. Am I missing something?

Marek Wesolowski



Follow the instructions to install LibreOffice Portable on a USB stick

A We suspect you might have forgotten that you actually need to install LibreOffice Portable on the USB drive, not just download it.

When you double-click a new download of the 'LibreOfficePortable_25.2.3_MultilingualStandard.paf.exe' file (1 in our screenshot) or whatever the latest version is when you come to download it from www.snipca.com/55063, LibreOffice Portable won't run immediately. Instead, it opens an installation tool 2.

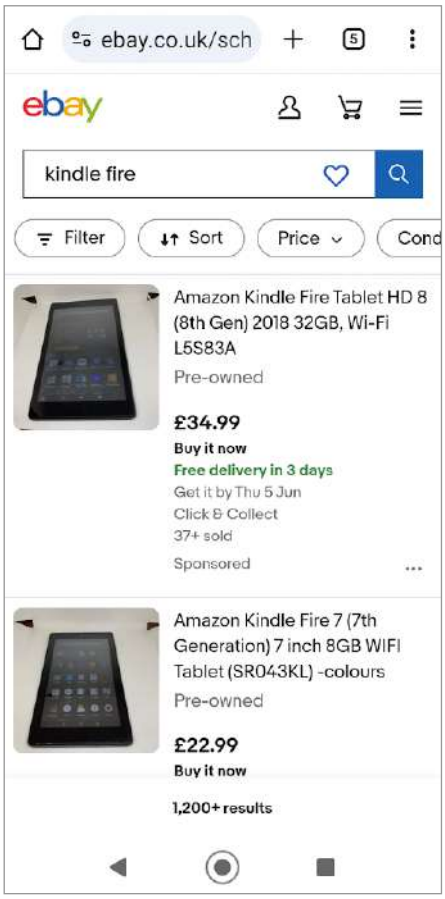
This can be confusing if you're trying to set up a portable app that runs from a memory stick rather than on your PC. However, LibreOffice needs to know which folder it's in on your USB stick, even if it's the parent folder. It also needs to create a few subfolders for its own data files. The installation process takes care of all this, and it takes place entirely on the USB stick, so you won't install anything on your PC.

Once you've worked through the on-screen instructions, you'll have a copy of LibreOffice Portable installed in your chosen folder. You can then run it on any PC simply by plugging in your USB stick and double-clicking the 'LibreOfficePortable.exe' file.

Why can't I install the eBay app on my Fire tablet?

Q What's going on between Amazon and eBay? I want to download the eBay app to my Amazon Kindle Fire tablet (pictured right), but it's not available in the Amazon Appstore, and Google Play Store tells me the eBay app isn't compatible with my device. Am I caught in the middle of some sort of tech company war?

Ron Tovey



You can access eBay on a Kindle Fire tablet (above) using a web browser (right)

A Amazon and eBay are certainly rivals in many respects but the problem here isn't anything to do with a commercial clash. It's simply that the latest version of the eBay app is not compatible with Fire OS, which is Amazon's forked version of Android.

For a while, eBay did make a Fire OS-compatible version, and it was available in Amazon's Appstore, but the company ended development several years ago. Presumably, this was because not enough users were connecting through the Fire OS app to warrant any ongoing effort.

It's possible that one day eBay might reintroduce a version of its app that works with Fire OS, but we doubt it will happen any time soon. In the meantime, you can still use eBay on a Fire tablet by visiting its website in your browser, whether you're using Amazon's own Silk or Google Chrome (see screenshot right).

Is it worth switching from a 4G to a 5G router?

Q Our local copper-based broadband is terribly slow, so for years I've been using a 4G router on the EE network, and getting around 20Mbps. I've been wondering about trying a 5G router, but I'm not sure if it's worth it. My phone has a 5G connection through the iD Mobile network, and everything seems slower.

Recently, I found myself right next to a 5G mast and had a signal strength of 100 per cent, so I ran a speed test. This showed 300Mbps, but dropped to just 8Mbps overall. So, my inclination is to stick with my existing 4G router. What do you think?

David Hobbs

Credit: admc_pixabaydotcom

The UK's 5G networks can be less reliable than 4G and sometimes slower overall

A iD Mobile is a 'virtual' mobile network (MVNO) that relies on Three's physical network. This is not the same as EE's physical network, so your phone's performance isn't a reliable indicator here. That said, all the UK's 5G networks are relatively new and, for various technical reasons, often struggle to deliver or sustain claimed speeds. So, counter-intuitively, 4G is often more reliable, if not necessarily faster at any given moment.

In a few years, using a 5G service for broadband will probably make a lot of sense, but we wouldn't rush to spend money on buying a 5G router just yet.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN...

Different CR batteries?

Q My ageing desktop computer displayed a message recently telling me its CMOS battery needed replacing. I opened the case and found that the old battery was a CR2032 button cell. I went rummaging through the drawer where I keep my batteries and found a pair of CR2025 batteries, still unused in their blister pack. I have no idea when I bought them, or what they were for. I popped one out of the packet and it looked almost identical to the CR2032 battery in my PC, although perhaps a little thinner. This made me wonder what the difference is technically? Could I use one of these CR2025 batteries in my computer without causing any damage?

Stephen Hall

CR batteries come in various sizes, denoted by the number on the front

A These batteries (pictured) look very similar, as you rightly observe. To understand the differences, it's worth knowing what the codes mean. These are defined by the International Electrotechnical Commission (www.iec.ch).

First, the C denotes the battery's chemical composition, which in these cells is non-rechargeable lithium manganese dioxide. The R simply stands for 'round'. The numbers after the CR define the cell's diameter and thickness in millimetres. A CR2032 measures 20mm across and is 3.2mm thick. Similarly, a CR2025 has a 20mm diameter but is bit thinner, at 2.5mm. Both supply a nominal voltage of 3V.

So, physically, a CR2025 will fit into a CR2032 socket. The voltage is also the same, so there is no risk of damaging your computer. However, this doesn't mean the thinner battery can reliably power your PC's CMOS chip, which stores your PC's BIOS.

The specific design of the battery holder varies from one device to another, but for a PC's motherboard it's usually a spring-loaded socket that pushes against an upper lip to keep the cell in place. It's possible that the spring mechanism on your motherboard would be strong enough to keep a thinner CR2025 battery in place, but if it's even a little loose, you could find that it doesn't maintain a reliable connection, in which case you would lose all your BIOS settings in an instant. The thinner battery also has a slightly lower capacity, although it would still last for years on a PC's motherboard.

So while a CR2025 battery might work in your computer, and it certainly shouldn't cause any electrical or physical damage, it's better to use a thicker CR2032 battery to ensure your PC works reliably.

Want to know the difference between technical terms? Email noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

Why is my BT Wi-Fi speed slow?

Q When I switched from copper to full-fibre broadband recently, BT showed me that I'm getting around 800Mbps to my optical network terminal (ONT), and to the Smart Hub 2. However, the connection from my Smart Hub to everything in my home is much slower at just 360Mbps. BT insists this is because I'm running everything over Wi-Fi. I can't use Ethernet cables because my various devices are spread out all over the house. However, even when I sit right next to the Smart Hub, my Wi-Fi speeds seem limited. Is there anything I can do?

Keith Norton

Upgrading to a Wi-Fi 6E router such as the Asus RT-AXE700 can seriously boost your speeds

A This is actually perfectly normal. Without venturing too far into the technical side, a Smart Hub 2's maximum Wi-Fi 5 speed is a little under 900Mbps. Over an Ethernet cable, it can manage up to a gigabit (1Gbps, or 1,000Mbps). These are theoretical rates, however. Real-world Wi-Fi performance is always slower, and often substantially so. BT is correct to say that Ethernet cables would giver you higher speeds.

We should also point out that some of your devices might be creating a bottleneck if they use older, slower Wi-Fi technologies. However, the bottom line is that if you want faster wireless speeds around your home, you'll have to upgrade your router to one that supports Wi-Fi 6, 6E or 7.

The pictured Asus RT-AXE7800, for example, is the current holder of our coveted Buy It! award (see page 33). This supports Wi-Fi 6E and offers theoretical combined speeds of up to 7,800Mbps (7.8Gbps). Again, real-world speeds will be much lower than this, but they'll almost certainly be a lot faster than your Smart Hub 2 can manage, and should be able to match the 800Mbps incoming speed at your ONT.

Next Issue

ON SALE Weds 30 July

- Will a BIOS update encrypt my data?
- Why won't websites work on my iPad?
- Can I use Alexa as a laptop speaker?...And many more

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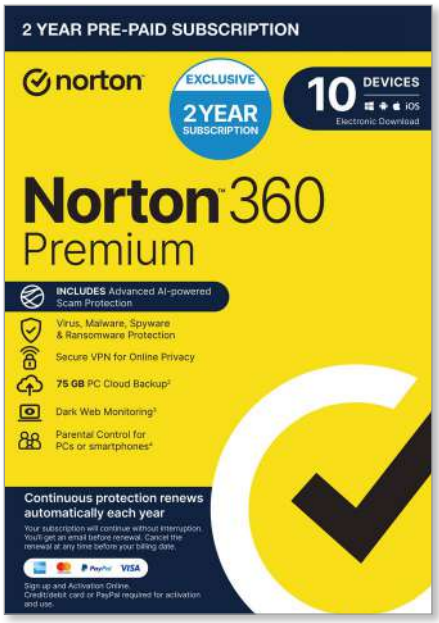

Norton is made by NortonLifeLock Inc – a standalone company dedicated to consumer cyber safety. It has always performed strongly in *Computeractive* antivirus tests, so we highly recommend it.

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*while stocks last

Problems Solved

Reader Support

Having a problem with our recommended software or expert tips? Email **editor@computeractive.co.uk** and we'll do our best to help

Is it now safe to install Windows 11 24H2?

Q Back in Issue 703's 'Break Windows' worst rules' Cover Feature you explained how the app GRC InControl (www.snipca.com/53585) keeps your version of Windows on the current build, while still allowing urgent security updates. I used this app to prevent Windows 11 24H2 from being installed – because you said it was causing problems – and keep my PC running 23H2.

Has Microsoft now fixed enough of the bugs in 24H2 to make it worth installing? And if so, is there anything particular to watch for if I unleash it?

Andrew Wells

A Since we published Issue 703 (12 February) Microsoft has released several key updates to fix bugs in 24H2. However, it's still causing some problems, as Microsoft found out when it was forced to withdraw June's Patch Tuesday update (released 10 June) after it caused "compatibility issues" on some computers. But these were relatively minor, affecting only a "small subset of PCs" with audio drivers from Dirac or while playing games with software designed to stop players cheating.

On the whole then, we think readers should install Windows 11 24H2. Despite the bugs it does add many useful features, such as duplicating tabs in File Explorer and using your phone as a webcam.

If you still run into problems, check whether Microsoft has identified them at www.snipca.com/55185. We published solutions for some of the earliest errors in Issue 702's 'Don't upgrade to 24H2' feature (page 62) – buy a back issue from www.snipca.com/55184. If you'd rather stick with 23H2, you can run this safely until 11 November, when Microsoft plans to end support.

Download BlueScreenView (in Zip file) 1
Download BlueScreenView with full install/uninstall support 2
Download BlueScreenView 64-bit (in Zip file) 3

NirSoft gives three download options – to run programs from a USB stick pick the '64-bit (in Zip file)' link

Which NirSoft download link should I click?

Q I love NirSoft's programs that you often recommend, but I never quite know which download link to click. For example, BlueScreenView (www.snipca.com/54741) gives three download links: 'Download BlueScreenView (in Zip file)' – 1 in our screenshot above; 'Download BlueScreenView with full install/uninstall support' 2; and 'Download BlueScreenView 64-bit (in Zip file)' 3. I want to run it from a USB stick, so which link should I click? My computer is 64bit by the way.

Rod Agnew

A NirSoft makes some excellent tools, but it should do more to explain these download options. The first link in the screenshot is a portable version for 32bit computers, so you don't need to install it to run.

Second is the full installable version (for 32bit and 64bit), which adds the program to the Start menu and a shortcut to the desktop. Choose this if you want to use the tool regularly. The third option is portable for 64bit machines. Either portable link is best for running from a USB stick, but you should click the third one (64bit).

Why are you ignoring DuckDuckGo's browser?

Q DuckDuckGo's browser can be installed on Windows computers, so why don't you include it in your Browser Tips section (page 42), alongside the usual suspects like Chrome, Edge, Brave and Firefox? It's now the only browser I use.

Peter Gascoyne

A We did include DuckDuckGo's browser in Issue 707's Browser Tips (page 42), explaining how to use its new Duck.ai tool (www.snipca.com/55186) to talk anonymously with various AI chatbots. But that's been its only appearance this year, so we'll try to include it more. It is, after all, much more private than Chrome and Edge.

By default, it blocks most trackers and cookie pop-ups, and clicking the Fire button deletes all your browsing data. To download it, visit https://duckduckgo.com/app and click the orange button.

Is Acemagic Chinese?

Q In Issue 711 (page 22) you reviewed the F3A mini PC (pictured below) from a company called Acemagic. I had never heard of them before, so I looked online for details. I think they may be a Chinese company, like all the other manufacturers of mini PCs as far as I can see. Didn't you once promise to state the country of origin in reviews?

Peter King

The F3A mini PC is made by Chinese manufacturer Acemagic

A Apologies, we forgot to mention that Acemagic is based in China. Peter's right that most manufacturers of mini PCs are Chinese, including Beelink, Minisforum and GMKtec, which makes our current favourite mini PC, the NucBox K11 (see page 32). Cheaper labour and factory costs mean they can keep prices far lower than US and European manufacturers.

Jargon Buster

1080p High-definition video: 1920x1080 pixels.

2FA See 'Two-factor authentication'.

32bit/64bit A measure of how much data a PC can process at once. Most older computers are 32bit, more modern ones are 64bit.

3G/4G/5G Technologies that deliver faster mobile broadband.

4K Video with a resolution of at least 3840x2160 pixels.

AAC Advanced Audio Coding. A type of music file.

AMOLED An alternative technology to LCD for creating flat-panel displays.

Aspect ratio A measurement of the shape of a screen. Traditional PC screens are 4:3. Widescreen displays are 16:9 or 16:10.

Benchmarking Comparing software and products with an accepted standard.

BIOS Software built into every PC that connects the vital components.

BitLocker Security feature in Windows 10 and 11 Pro that encrypts drives.

Bootable Describes a device or disc with system files on it so it can be used to start up your computer.

Cache A temporary space for storing information.

Caddy A box into which you can fit a hard drive, converting it into an external drive.

Captcha Distorted text you have to type to prove you're a human.

Chatbot An AI program designed to recreate conversation with humans.

Client A program that acts as an interface between PC and server.

CMOS A battery that powers the BIOS firmware in your laptop.

Cookie A small text file stored on your computer by a website.

Copilot+ An enhanced version of Microsoft's Copilot AI tool.

Crowdfunding A process where a company gets the financing to launch a new product from prospective customers online.

Cryptocurrency A digital currency not backed by any country.

CSV A standard file format used by most spreadsheet programs.

Dark web Websites that can only be accessed using special software such as the Tor Browser.

DisplayPort A socket for connecting monitors.

Distro A version of the Linux OS and the programs that go with it.

DOCX The default file format used by Word 2007 and later.

Dolby Atmos Surround-sound tech that adds 'height' to audio.

Domain These are used to identify one or more IP addresses.

Driver A file that tells Windows how to work with an external device.

DRM Digital Rights Management. Software that limits the copying of a file.

Dual boot To set up a PC with two operating systems.

Emoji A small graphic that can be inserted into a text or email.

Emulator A program that makes one computer act like another.

Encryption key A random string of characters used to encrypt and decrypt sensitive data.

End-to-end encryption Encrypting messages so only the sender and recipient can read them.

Ethernet A standard used for almost all wired computer networks.

EXE A program file designed to run in Windows.

exFAT Microsoft's file system for USB sticks and SD cards.

False positive When an antivirus program wrongly detects a malware infection.

FAT32 An old system used for formatting hard drives.

Field of view The amount of space measured in angles that can be seen from the camera lens.

Firewall Software or hardware that prevents unauthorised access to a PC.

Firmware Software stored on hardware to control its operation.

FLAC A type of digital audio file that can be created from CD with no loss of audio quality.

Flash memory A type of memory that can retain information without a power source.

Forked When developers take source code from software to make another program.

Full HD Resolution of 1920x1080 pixels.

Gesture Finger movements on a screen that perform an action.

GHz Gigahertz. A measure of how many instructions a chip can process per second.

GIF A type of image file often used on the web.

Gigabit Ethernet A very fast networking standard that can transfer data at up to 1,000Mbps.

GPS Global positioning system. Satellite-based navigational system.

GPU A chip designed to create 3D graphics, but which can also be used for other computing tasks.

Graphics card A component in a computer that produces the image shown on the monitor.

Hardware encryption A method of encrypting data using specialised hardware.

HDMI A type of connection that transmits high-definition video and audio signals.

HSPA+ Evolved High-Speed Packet Access. A mobile-network technology that enhances the performance of 3G networks.

Hz Hertz. Measures the frequency something happens: 1Hz equals once a second.

IP address A unique set of numbers used to identify computers and websites on the internet.

IP56 Protected from limited dust exposure and strong water jets, but not fully waterproof or dustproof.

JPEG XL Modern image format with both lossy and lossless compression.

Kill switch Quickly shuts down a device or app to stop it working, usually for safety or security.

LED An electronic device that emits light.

Lossless File formats that take up more space but provide higher sound/video quality.

M4P Apple's DRM file format for music bought from its iTunes Store before 2009.

Metadata A set of data that gives information about a file.

MicroSD card A small type of memory card.

MVNO Mobile virtual network operator. A mobile provider that piggybacks on another network.

NPU Specialised chip designed for performing AI tasks.

NTFS A file system used by all recent versions of Windows.

OCuLink Connectivity standard that allows high-speed data transfers between devices using PCI Express.

OGG A free alternative to the MP3 standard for compressing digital audio.

OLED A thin-film organic light-emitting diode used in computer displays and television screens.

Open source Software that can be modified by anyone.

Passkey A method for signing into accounts by typing a one-off code, fingerprint or facial recognition rather than a password.

Phishing A form of internet fraud that tries to trick you into revealing personal details.

Plain text Text in a document that doesn't contain any formatting.

Proxy server A computer that sits between your computer and the internet and filters the connection.

QHD Quad High Definition.

QR code A barcode that can be read using smartphones.

Quick Charge Qualcomm's fast-charging standard.

RAM The computer's working area, used for data storage while the PC is switched on.

Ransomware Malware run by hackers who lock files on your PC and demand a payment to release them.

Read speed How long it takes a hard drive to 'read' data, and respond to it.

Refresh rate Measured in Hertz (Hz), the number of times per second that the image on your monitor is redrawn.

Refurbished A second-hand device that has been repaired by its manufacturer.

Smishing Scams that involve text messages sent to phones.

Split tunnelling Lets you choose which apps use a VPN and which use your regular internet connection, improving speed and flexibility.

SSD Storage that, unlike a hard drive, uses no moving parts.

Tag A keyword used to describe a file or web page.

Timestamp The time which an event is recorded by a computer.

TLS A technology for keeping information secure and secret when sent over the internet.

TOPS Trillion operations per second. A measure of a PC's processing power when performing AI tasks.

Tor Browser A web browser designed for anonymous surfing.

TPM A computer chip that stores keys which encrypt data on your hard drive.

Tri-band A router that broadcasts on three radio bands.

Two-factor authentication A system that uses two different means to identify the user.

TXT A basic file format that contains nothing but text.

USB 2.0/3.0/3.1/3.2/4.0 Faster successors to USB.

USB Power Delivery Technology that enables faster charging and data transfer via a USB cable.

USB-A The original type of USB connector, released in 1996.

USB-C A connector that's reversible.

VPN Keeps all internet communication safe and private.

Wi-Fi 5 A standard for wireless networks that allows for much higher transfer speeds than 802.11n.

Wi-Fi 6 Wi-Fi standard with speeds up to 10 times faster than 802.11ac.

Wi-Fi 6E Wi-Fi 6 extended to include the 6GHz band.

Wi-Fi Calling Lets you make and receive voice and video calls over a Wi-Fi connection.

Widget A small program such as a calendar that runs on the Windows desktop.

Write speed How long it takes a hard drive to save data.

ZIP file A file that contains compressed documents or files.

Broadband Deals

	Provider	Package Name	Monthly Price	Contract Length	Broadband Speed	Reward*	First-year Cost*
1	vodafone	Fibre Fibre 150	**£26.00** £29.00 from 1st April 2026	24 Months	**150Mbps** avg. speed	**£125** Gift Card	CHEAPEST **£196.00**
2	sky	Full Fibre 150	**£26.00** Price could change during contract	24 Months	**150Mbps** avg. speed	**£80** Gift Card	**£232.00**
3	Virgin media	M125	**£23.99** £27.49 from April 2026 Bill	24 Months	**132Mbps** avg. speed	**£100** Bill Credit	**£198.38**
4	Community Fibre	1Gbps Fibre	**£25.00** £27.00 from 1st April 2026	24 Months	**920Mbps** avg. speed	**N/a**	**£306.00**

* Payments based on 12x monthly cost (including price rise) minus reward value

*Reward subject to change. Available as of 19th June 2025.

GO COMPARE

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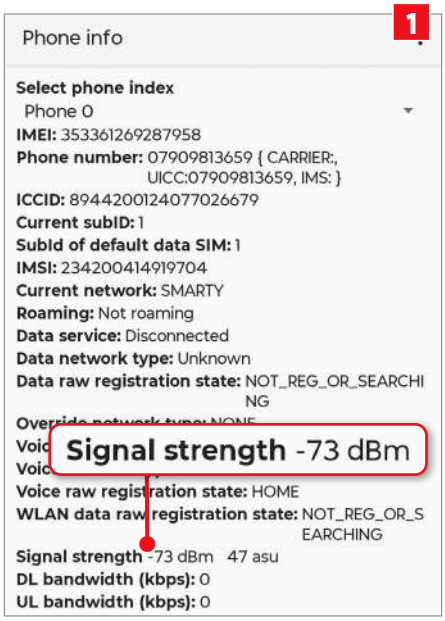
Know How

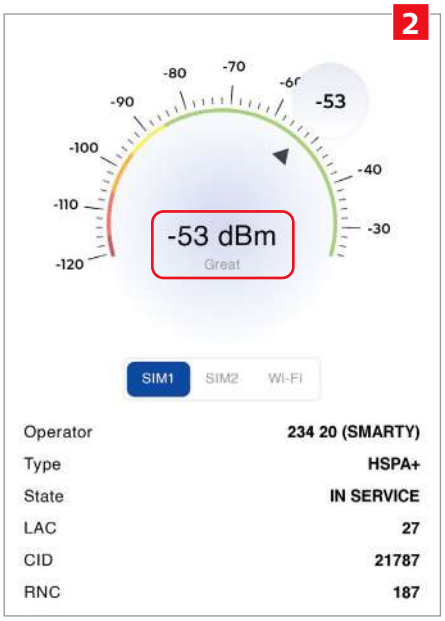
Tired of getting an unreliable phone connection indoors, **Robert Irvine** tries to...

Find his mobile-signal sweet spot

When mobile networks boast that their 4G coverage spans 99.5 per cent of the UK, and their 5G isn't far behind, they often neglect to mention this means outdoors. When you're indoors, there's no guarantee you'll get a good signal, especially if you live in a building with thick exterior walls – like I do.

> I don't live in a cave so I should have no problem getting 4G





Robert found it easier to measure his signal strength using Netmonitor (2) than his phone's cluttered built-in tool (1)

Rather than display '4G' or '5G' in the top-right corner of its screen, my phone usually has 'H+', meaning the strongest signal I can get is HSPA+ (also known as 3G+). Other times, typically in the middle of a chat with my mother, I lose connection altogether and have to go outside to resume my conversation.

Yes I know about Wi-Fi Calling and have enabled it on my phone, but it doesn't always work (my internet can be flaky too). Besides, I live in an urban area, not in a cave in the Yorkshire Dales, so I should have no problem getting 4G.

Out of interest, I visited the website CellMapper (www.snipca.com/55305), which shows the location of 4G (LTE) and 5G masts in your area, as well as their respective coverages. I selected my mobile network (Three, via the MVNO Smarty) in the Provider menu in the top- right corner, and was unsurprised to see my home falls just outside the range of the nearest masts. Ofcom's new 4G and 5G coverage checker (see page 8) confirmed the signal for my address is only good outdoors.

As I have no intention of moving closer to the ugly masts, I decided to at least try and find my signal's 'sweet spot'. This is the position in your home where you can enjoy the best mobile reception and not leave callers shouting 'Hello? Are you still there?!' when you get cut off again.

I'd read about a hidden 'field test mode' on smartphones, which measures your mobile signal as you walk around, so you can determine where it's strongest. The location of this mode varies between phone makes and models, so I'd advise asking ChatGPT. This told me to switch off Wi-Fi then open the Phone app on my Motorola phone and dial *#*#4636#*#*.

Doing so displayed a Testing menu where I tapped 'Phone information' then looked for the 'Signal strength' entry. Here, I saw my signal was -73 dBm (decibel milliwatts – see screenshot 1) though it was fluctuating. The closer the dBm is to zero, the stronger your network signal, and by moving to another room I boosted it to -64 dBm.

This was useful information, but monitoring the signal on a page crammed with other technical data wasn't ideal – plus I'd need to dial that complicated code again to check it in future. So instead I installed the free Android app Netmonitor (www.snipca.com/55306), which helps you "find out which corners of your office or home are having the best reception". Apple doesn't allow network monitors in its App Store, but iPhone users can use the built-in field-test mode: dial *3001#12345#* and press Call.

I dismissed Netmonitor's offer of a free Premium trial, granted it permission to access my phone and location, and tweaked its privacy options to avoid personalised ads. The app then opened and displayed my current signal strength in the friendly form of a speedometer. This allowed me to track the dBm figure more easily.

I walked around with my phone until the signal reached its closest figure to zero: -53 dBm (see screenshot 2). The 'sweet spot' turned out to be right by my bedroom window, which will prove handy on lazy Sundays.

Field testing may not have boosted my 4G or 5G, but now I know where to stand to get better HSPA+.

Need help measuring your mobile-phone signal? Let us know: noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

Next issue: Robert tries to charge his phone using solar power

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